

*Short Fiction
About
Narcissism
And
Mental Health*

(With a Dozen Reader Guides)

1st EDITION

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The Suffering of Being Kafka

Short Fiction

A Beheaded Cart

By Sam Vaknin

Read the [Hebrew original](#).

(In Hebrew, the word "Agala" means both cart and the feminine form of calf. A beheaded calf is among the sacrificial offerings enumerated in the Bible).

My grandfather, cradling an infant's crib, departed. Navigating left and right, far along the pavement, he reached a concrete, round, post. There he rested, sheltered from the humid sun by peeling posters for lachrymose Turkish films. He pushed the crib outside the penumbral circle and waited.

Curious folks besieged the old man and his orphaned frame and then proceeded to buy from him the salted seeds and sweets that he lay, meticulously organised, inside the crib. My grandfather smiled at them through sea-blue eyes, as he wrapped the purchased sweetmeats in rustling brown paper bags.

My embarrassed uncles built for him a creaking wooden cart from remaindered construction materials. They painted it green and mounted it on large, thin-tyred, wheels borrowed from an ancient pram. They attached to it a partitioned table-top confiscated from the greengrocer down the lane. Every morning, forehead wrinkled, my grandfather would fill the wooden compartments with various snacks and trinkets, at pains to separate them neatly. Black sunflower seeds, white pumpkin seeds, the salted and the sweet, tiny plastic toys bursting with candies, whistles, and rattles.

Still, he never gave up his crib, installing it on top of his squeaking vehicle, and filling it to its tattered brim with a rainbow of offerings. At night, he stowed it under the cart, locking it behind its two crumbling doors, among the unsold merchandise.

With sunrise, my grandfather would exit the house and head towards the miniature plot of garden adjoining it. He would cross the patch, stepping carefully on a pebbled path in its midst. Then, sighing but never stooping, he would drive his green trolley – a tall and stout and handsome man, fair-skinned and sapphire-eyed. "A movie star" – they gasped behind his back. Day in and day out, he impelled his rickety pushcart to its concrete post, there dispensing to the children with a smile, a permanence till dusk. With

sunset, he gathered his few goods, bolted the fledgling flaps, and pushed back home, a few steps away.

When he grew old, he added to his burden a stool with an attached umbrella, to shield him from the elements, and a greenish nylon sheet to protect his wares. He became a fixture in this town of my birth. His lime cart turned into a meeting spot – "by Pardo", they would say, secure in the knowledge that he would always be there, erect and gracious. Like two forces of nature, my grandpa and the concrete post – older than the fading movie posters – watched the town transformed, roads asphalted, children turn adults, bringing their off-spring to buy from him a stick of bitter black chewing gum.

Lone by his cart, he bid the dead farewell and greeted the newborn, himself aging and bending. Creases sprouted in his face, around his dimming sights, and in his white and delicate hands.

My grandfather had one love: my grandmother. A ravishing, proud, raven-haired woman. A framed retouched photo of her hung, imposing, on one of the walls. In it she stood, defiant, leaning on a carved pillar in a faraway place. This is how he must have seen her at first: a mysterious, sad-eyed disparity between dark and fair. Thus he fell in love and made her his only world.

This woman sat by his side, adjacent to his azure pushcart, day in and day out. She said nothing and he remained mute. They just stared with vacuous eyes, perhaps away, perhaps inside, perhaps back, to previous abodes in bustling cities.

At first, she seemed to like being his sidekick, confidently doling confectionery to toddlers, whose mothers remained forever infants in her memory. Intermittently, she laid a shrivelled hand on his venous knee, leaving it there for a split, fluttering, second, conveying warmth and withdrawing as unobtrusively. It was enough to restore him to his full stature. But then, the municipal workers came and pasted funereal announcements onto his concrete pole and the magic was all but gone.

My grandma withered, dilapidated by this onerous existence. Eveningtime, she would get up and carry her stool afore, clenched in two twiggy hands, tediously dragging her reluctant self on the long march home. My grandfather observed her, his eyes a moist, eroding guilt. His disintegrating pushcart, the rain-drenched figure of his loved one, the whizzing torment of the desert winds, the sound of the crackling paper bags in her arthritic palms – they all conspired to deny him his erstwhile memory of her.

Each morning, my grandfather woke up to study this ageless image as he glided over her translucent skin, high-arching cheeks, and sleep-fluttery eyelashes. He fended off the intrusions of the world as he smoothed the covers and tucked her figure in. Then, he would get up and make her

breakfast, arranging ceremoniously her medicines in multicoloured plastic containers on the tray.

But my grandma rejected his sunup pleas. She wouldn't go on living. One silent morning, she clung to her sheets and wouldn't rise and accompany him. That day, grey and defeated, my grandpa ploughed the pavement with his barrow, unfolded a worn deck chair, and sank in, awaiting my grandmother's reappearance.

When she did not materialise, he left his post much earlier than usual. He emptied the compartments duteously, packed the unsold goods in large canvas sacks, tidying them away behind the two bottom doors of his cart. He then unfurled a polyester sheet above it and sailed home, shoving and cajoling his screeching and scraping workstation.

My grandma was in bed, as he had left her, ensconced in blankets, a suicidal tortoise, glaring at the ceiling as it bled in aqueous abstracts. My grandfather parked his rusting, faded, wagon and climbed home. His wife awoke with startled whimpers, tears streaming silently down her creviced face, tearing his heart with the iron grip of festering love. He hugged her and showered her with panicky little kisses.

She froze and fortified her berth with pillows piled high, staring at him through narrow cracks of oozing sanity.

One day, my grandpa, returning in the evening, left his cart outside, uncharacteristically. He entered and, for a few minutes, he and my grandmother just watched each other wearily. He extended a calloused hand and she dreamily stood up and escorted him to their porch, which overlooked the weed-grown garden.

My grandfather draped her shoulders with a knitted woollen shawl. He tightened it, and then, her shivering hand in his, he sat his love among some cushions he prepared. She glanced aimlessly at a guava tree that shot among the trail of gravelled stones. My grandfather contemplated her awhile and then, with sudden resoluteness, left.

Seconds later he reappeared among the shrubs, saluted her with a sledgehammer he held tenuously with both hands. She strained her face, attentive, consuming his image, like a flower would the sun, or the blind do the sounds.

Gasping and panting, my grandpa heaved the pushcart to the centre of the plot. With repeated, furious, blows, he dislocated its wheels and doors. Reduced to splintered wood and twisted metal, he cocooned it in the nylon throw and left it, devastated by the trees.

Sitting beside, they watched the setting sun diffracted from the green-hued sculpture in the garden. A smile budded in my grandma's honeyed eyes and spread into my grandfather's deep blue gaze.

The cart stood there for years, disintegrating inexorably beneath its blackening shield. Its wheels, now rooted in the soil, it sank into the

mildewed ground, another, peculiarly shaped sapling. My grandpa never adjusted the synthetic sheet that swathed it, nor did he dig out the burgeoning wheels.

My grandpa was visiting a pharmacy, replenishing her medications, when my grandma died. With the dignity of the indigent, he never bargained, never raised his voice. Packed in small, white, paper bags, he rushed the doses to his wife, limping and winded.

This time the house was shuttered doors and windows. My grandma wouldn't respond to his increasingly desperate entreaties. He flung himself against the entrance and found her sprawled on the floor, her bloodied mouth ajar. As she fell, she must have hit her head against the corner of a table. She was baking my grandfather his favourite pastries.

Her eyes were shut. My grandpa knew she died. He placed her remedies on the floured and oiled table and changed into his best attire. Kneeling beside her, he gently wiped clean my grandma's hands and mouth and head and clothed her in her outdoors coat.

His business done, he lay besides her and, hugging her frail remains, he shut his eyes.

My uncles and aunts found them, lying like that, embraced.

My grandparents' tiny home was government property and was reclaimed. The sanitary engineers, revolted, removed from the garden the worm-infested, rotting relic and the putrid sheet concealing it.

The next day, it was hauled by sturdy garbage collectors into a truck and, with assorted other junk, incinerated.

[Return](#)

Language of Black and Red

By Sam Vaknin

Eli and I sit on ladder-backs next to a luxurious roulette in a casino in Spain. I can almost pick glitters from the heavy, lowered chandeliers. I can practically touch the shiny wooden wheel. I can see the croupier's manicured nails. Lithe young bellhops, clad in ornamental uniforms, place trays on gypsum pillars next to our chairs. We fervently gulp the champagne from the tall, prismatic glasses and nibble at the tiny sandwiches.

We are that lucky that we dare not leave the table, not even to relieve ourselves.

Piles of shiny square chips represent our exceptional streak of winnings. The table supervisor looks very anxious. He shifts restlessly on his elevated seat, hawk-eyeing everyone malevolently. Sure enough, he doesn't like us. He clears all other players, letting us bet in splendid isolation, facing each other.

Eli's upper lip and temples glisten. My armpits ooze the acrid smell of manly perspiration. Easy to tell we are tense or apprehensive or both. We evade each other's gaze. Our hands are shaking and the boys keep pumping us with increasingly inebriating drinks. They want us under the influence. They want us to cough up everything we have and then some. We want to win. We want the casino broke. Our differences are profoundly irreconcilable.

Eli is a quarter of a tough century my senior. His life-swept face is haggard, straggly and raven eyebrows, lips cruel and eyes chillingly penetrating. He finds his sense of humour irresistible. It often is.

My baby face is framed by the plastic quadrangles of my glasses. I broadcast innocence and guile. The reactions I provoke are mixed. Some sense my vulnerability and hasten to protect me. Others find my haughty slyness loathsome. I guess I conjure my defencelessness to con my victims.

It may prove unhealthy to lose our sponsors' money. These people are charm itself and sheer delight – until you breach their pockets. They tend to lose their fabled equanimity. They regard business losses as hostile acts and the perpetrators as lethal enemies. So, they strike first, giving you no chance to err, to apologise, to scrutinise.

We are piling on not be piled in. The dough is multiplying. What if we lose? Eli says he has this thing going for him tonight, a wild card, from nature, and he does not dream to stop even though we reek of the casino's funds, even though two Spanish beauties resolutely scramble over him and heavies in bursting suits forage around obtrusively.

Eli's protruding eyes fixated on the wheel, mesmerically attempting to bring it to a favoured halt.

It smoothly winds down and Eli ignores my furious pestering: our underwriters invested to test and implement a betting method I developed. "I am offended" – I whisper, he ignores me. A febrile Eli has bonded with the table and every number wins, especially his choices.

"Twenty eight!" – he hisses, sidestepping the croupier to fetch his gains. He sprawls on the green felt surface and lovingly enfolds the clacking tokens. Reclining, eyes shut agloat, he savours his unaccustomed fortune. For he deserves a break. To Eli, this is not a game or, as I regard it, merely another path to self-enrichment.

To him, it is a sweet revenge for all the years he wasted, vending decaying fruits, along dusty and sizzling highways. This loot proves his detractors wrong. It loudly states, in black and red: I am here, not to be snubbed.

"Let's play some baccarat" – he sneers – "I am tired of this game."

We stretch our limbs and Eli surveys the killing fields we leave behind. He tremulously stacks the chips on one another, by size and then by colour. We carry them with trepidation all the way to the cashier and convert them to pesetas. Eli halves the tottering mound. He entreats me to deposit one of the two resulting heaps in the strongbox in our room.

He pleadingly commands me:

"No matter how much I beg and threaten, order or cajole – do not be tempted to obey me. Do not bring down this money."

I eagerly acquiesce.

"And now" – he rubs his hands – "Let's fry this fish in its own fat. Let's use some of the profits to dine in the casino's restaurant. Do you know that eateries in gambling dens are the best in the world?"

I don't. It is my first trip away from Israel. But he is right, the food is mouth-watering. A gypsy band of violins plays in the background.

Now, cleaned out gamblers alight by our burdened table and pat Eli's upright back. They greet him eagerly, as though, through him, they humble the much unloved establishment. They questioningly glance at me, a cold appraising look. They recount how they turned pros and swap the numbers of their rooms in the hotel above the gaming halls.

They sound content but look harassed and wiry. Involuntary ticks ravage their hands and faces. They all sport golden rings, red necks enchained with chokers. Their eyes dart restively. They sound as though they are

listening and nod their heads in places, right and wrong – but they are distant. Minute or two of pleasantries and off they go to haunt another patron.

The dinner over, Eli fires up a black cigar and sighs. He casts an ominous stare at me for daring to suggest we call it a day.

"Don't be a jinx!" – he rasps – "You don't retire on a night like this with Lady Luck herself in partnership. These are the kind of early hours that casinos fear, I tell you" – and he goes on to rattle off the names of acquaintances turned millionaires. The next day they reverted, he ruefully admits. "Too greedy" – is his verdict – "Didn't know when to stand up."

Now that we've won, can we try out my method?

He snorts.

"It puts me to sleep, your martingale" – he grunts – "Its slowness drives me to distraction. I came here to enjoy myself, not just to profit. If you insist, here is some cash. Go, play your darned system. Just do me a favour, stray to another table."

Eli, returning to our first roulette, is greeted with regal pomp. I wander to a further board with lower minimum wagers. I squash my way into a raucous mob. They screech and squeal with every spin. I place some of my meager funds on red. Despite the tiny sum and nearly equal chances – I waver nauseous and scared. Until the ball reposes and the croupier announces black. Twenty eight.

I lost.

Another dose on red, just slightly larger. Another anxious wait while the croupier employs a silver rake to place the bets. I sneak a peek at Eli's table. It's hard to tell his state. His body tilts in zealous inclination, his shaded eyes impale the imperturbable dealer, his twitchy hands engulf the cards doled out from the "shoe". It's "21" or Blackjack, a pretty basic card game.

On certain rounds, Eli presents his palm, two of its fingers pointing at the "shoe". The dealer acknowledges him discreetly and draws the cards. He lays them gingerly in front of Eli who, exultant, gathers his winnings and tips the grateful worker. I can relax.

My tiny gains accumulate. The hours pass, the tables empty, it's only I and the croupier. My capital is nearly doubled. Eli, his countenance spent, keeps gambling. His bobbing head recoils as he awakes from interrupted slumber. It's just the two of us against the weary staff.

As autumn night is pierced by moonlight, the practiced smiles are lifted, wiped is the feigned civility of all involved. Players and house alike frantically observe each card, each turn of the wheel, the rested ball, the flickering digits of the stressed croupier. We shut our bloodshot eyes between one twirl and another, in intervals when cards aren't dealt and profits aren't paid.

Fatigue-glued to my chair I find it hard to stoop and place the wagers on the fluctuating squares of the roulette board. Eli wobbles towards me, his loosened tie dangling on his much-stained shirt. He undoes the upper buttons and slumps onto a lounge.

The presence of his silence compels me to skip the coming spin. I half turn towards him, rubbing my eyes with sticky hand. We stare at the tarnished carpet until he mutters:

"I am left with nothing."

And then:

"Go get the money from the safe."

But then he had instructed me to ignore such orders. Using my method, I have doubled our funds and more while Eli lost all our money overnight. I feel wrath-struck. I want to grab him by his tainted collar and shake him till it hurts. Instead, I rise, my legs a wobbly and oedematous mass. I stumble hesitantly until the pains subside and I can properly walk, toes hard on heels, to the elevator bank.

When I am back, Eli is slouched, position same, and snores. I could refrain from rousing him, say that I fell asleep in our room, that I lost the key to the safety deposit box, that I stirred him up but he wouldn't budge, I could come up with anything I damn well please, now that he is sound asleep – he will thank me for it, he will want to believe me. It is our last chance.

I regard the rustling plastic bag. I feel the greenish notes inside. Then I jiggle Eli's shoulder. He comes to in panic, surveying the alien landscape. Then, mechanically, he snatches our neatly packed reserve and falters towards his table.

I bide the time to his return, eyes glazed, lips forced into a tortuous smile.

"It's over" – he mumbles – "let's get out of here."

I collect my winnings from the board and proudly display them. He snickers:

"Less than my losses in every minute of this cursed evening."

But that is all we have. We pack our meager belongings and sneak through the back door to the taxi at the head of a nocturnal queue. Eli sprawls across the upholstered back seat for a quick shut-eye. I give the driver the name of our hotel at the heart of Madrid and he embarks on the twisting byways of the mountain slope.

Midway, Eli stops the cab and throws up through the semi lowered pane. The irate cabby refuses to proceed. He points to an antiquated manual meter and demands his fee. I pay him and with emphatic whoosh he vanishes behind a gloomy curve.

Eli and I, left crouching on a foreign hillside, far from any settlement, the night a velvet murk. Eli ascends the road, takes me in tow, two

Chaplinesque figures in bargain-basement suits and fluttering cravats. The hours pass and we are no closer to our destination. A rising sun daubs us with pink and wine.

Eli turns to me and vows:

"From now on we play only with your system, Shmuel, I swear to you, only your martingale."

I don't respond. I distrust Eli's ability to keep his promises. This pledge came unsolicited and useless.

Eli drags his feet laboriously, wipes tears from reddened eyes and moans:

"Only your way, I guarantee, never again just gambling wildly. We wager on your brain and win, we win a lot, I'm talking millions. We won't know what to do with it, I'm telling you. After all, how many steaks can one consume? With mushrooming gains, we will occupy the best hotels and bang the greatest stunners, and wear the chicest clothes..."

There is such yearning in his voice. I embrace him warmly and I say:

"Sure thing, Eli, it's bound to happen. You and I, and screw the world. What you have just described is only the beginning. Just stick to my gambling system and it will turn out fine. Casinos everywhere will fear us like the plague..."

"The plague" – Eli reiterates and we stand, cuddled, two silhouettes carved against the inexorably rising day.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Narcissism, Substance Abuse, and Reckless Behaviors

Grandiosity Deconstructed

Abusing the Gullible Narcissist

Narcissistic Immunity

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

This part is meant only to provoke thoughts. It is not a substitute for independent thinking, criticism, and analysis.

Do you feel pity for Eli? Why?

How is Eli's gambling related to his narcissism?

How does Eli's narcissism show? In what ways does him affect him and his nearest?

What do you think of my behavior in the story? Should and could I have behaved differently?

Can you visualize Eli's future?

What relationship do I maintain with Eli and why do I stick with him?

[Return](#)

On the Bus to Town

by Sam Vaknin

Read the [*Hebrew original*](#).

I must catch the city-bound bus. I have to change at the Central Station and travel a short distance, just a few more minutes, to jail. The prison walls, to the left, will shimmer muddy yellow, barbwire fence enclosing empty watchtowers, the drizzle-induced swamp a collage of virile footsteps. I am afraid to cross its ambiguous solidity, the shallow-looking depths. After that I have to purge my tattered sneakers with branches and stones wrenched out of the mucky soil around our barracks.

But there is still way to go.

I mount the bus and sit near a dishevelled, unshaven man. His abraded pair of horn-rimmed glasses is adjoined to his prominent nose with a brown adhesive. He reeks of stale sweat and keeps pondering the clouded surface of his crumbling watch. His pinkie sports a rectangular, engraved ring of golden imitation.

The bus exudes the steamy vapours of a mobile rain forest. People cram into the passages, dragging nylon-roped shopping bags, shrieking children, and their own perspiring carcasses, their armpits and groins stark dark discolorations.

All spots are taken. Their occupants press claret noses onto the grimy windows and rhythmically wipe the condensation. They explicitly ignore the crowd and the censuring, expectant stares of older passengers. As the interminable road unwinds, they restlessly realign their bodies, attuned to seats and neighbours.

Our driver deftly skirts the terminal's piers and ramps. Between two rows of houses shrouded in grimy washing, he hastens towards the freeway. He turns the radio volume up and speakers inundate us with tunes from the Levant. Some travellers squirm but no one asks to turn it down. It is the hourly news edition soon. Thoughts wander, gaze introspectively inverted, necks stretch to glimpse the passing views.

The broadcast screeches to a sickening but familiar halt. Faint cries, the Doppler wail of sirens, air surgically hacked by chopper rotor blades, the voices of authorities grating with shock and panic. The disembodied speech of spluttering witnesses. On site reporters at a loss for words record mere moans and keens. An orgy of smoking flesh.

The breaking news has cast us all in moulds of frozen dread and grief. Here burly finger poking nose, there basket petrified in midair haul, my neighbour absentmindedly rotates his hefty ring.

The announcer warns of imminent terrorist attacks on public transport. It recommends to err on the side of caution and to exhaustively inspect fellow commuters. Trust no one – exhorts a representative of the law – be on alert, examine suspect objects, call on your driver if in doubt. Pay heed to dubious characters and odd behaviours.

Our bus is trapped in a honking row of cars, under a seething sun. The baking asphalt mirrors. I am anxious not to be delayed. The wardens warned us: "Never be late. Make no excuses. Even if God himself comes down – be back on time." Latecomers lose all privileges and are removed to maximum security in Beersheba.

I debate the fine points with myself: is mass slaughter ample reason for being tardy or merely an excuse? No force is more majeure than prison guards. I smile at that and the tension plexus slackens.

A febrile thought:

Jailers are ultra right-wing and rabid nationalists. Terrorism must never be allowed to interfere with the mundane, they say. And I rehearse in hopeful genuflection: "You mustn't send a Jewish prisoner to an Arab-infested prison. After all, I was held up by Arab assassins who slaughtered Jews!"

The legalistic side (they are big on it in penal institutions):

How can I prove my whereabouts (on this bus) throughout the carnage? Think alibi. The inmate always shows that he has complied, the warden equally assumes he is being conned, but even he must prove it. A stalking game with predators and prey, but ever shifting roles.

I rise, prying my neighbour loose from contemplation. He eyes me, wicked. I pass a soiled boot above his clustered knees and place it gingerly between two bursting bags. Moustachioed women wipe milky exudation from upper lips with blotted synthetic handkerchiefs. They address me in a foreign, gravelling, language. They use elephantine, venous, legs to push aside their luggage – a gesture of goodwill more than a decongesting measure.

I feel the clammy, throbbing breathing of another on my trousers. Thrusting my other leg, I straddle the passage, two Herculean pillars, a sea of Mediterranean groceries between my calves. Toe by heel, I get nearer to the stuporous driver, a human ripple in my wake.

"I am a prisoner" – I inform his beefy neck.

His muscles tense but he does not respond or turn to scrutinise me.

"I am an inmate" – I repeat – "Can you please confirm by writing in this diary (I point at a grey notepad I am holding) that I was on your bus at this hour? I have no pen" – I add.

He casts a sideways glance at me, monitoring the hopeless traffic jam from the corner of a bloodshot eye.

(Emphatically):

"So, you are a prisoner? What could you have you done?" (you chalky, myopic, intellectual).

Right behind him, a woman past her prime, face coated, breasts nestled in a pointed bra. The driver cannot keep his eyes off them. She, on her part, seems to be fixated on his tensile musculature. They both start at the sound of my voice:

"Banks."

"Banks!" – the driver mirthfully slaps his bulging thighs and the woman chuckles throatily, lips peeled to reveal pink-tainted teeth. "Come over here, I'll sign it."

In one untrammelled motion, he removes a hirsute hand from the oversized steering wheel, takes hold of my jotter, and opens it. Off goes his second hand. He scribbles laboriously, tongue perched on fleshy lips, ending with a flourishing signature.

People are murmuring throughout the bus. My answer is equivocal. It could imply armed robbery – or fraud – or counterfeit. I may be violent. The innocent looking are the really dangerous. I may even be an Arab, impossible to tell them apart nowadays.

A web of mutters spins from crimson lips to hairy ears, from crumb-strewn mouths to avid auricles. I return to my seat, retracing my erstwhile progress, facing the hydra. With the pad in my back pocket, I am calmer. Que serra, serra.

At the edge of my awareness a shrill, self-righteous female voice:

"Get out now, or I am calling the police."

I open my eyes, trying to pinpoint the mayhem. Somewhat behind me, the altercation draws closer, a portly woman pushing aside strap-holding passengers. She is preceded by a far younger female scrambling, expression hunted, to flee the bully.

She passes me by, her coarse contours defaced by agony, wheezing through luscious lips, one hand supporting heavy bust, the other clutching a sheaf of papers densely written in calligraphic Arabic.

"Driver" – the mob exclaims – "There is an Arab on board!"

"Go down! I am not sharing a bus with a terrorist!" – a woman screams and then another: "Maybe she is dangerous? Did you frisk her when she boarded?"

The driver negotiates the dense circulation, manoeuvring among a fleet of barely visible compacts. The noise distracts him. Without braking, he turns around and enquires: "What is it? What's the matter?"

"There's an Arab woman here" – one volunteers to edify him – "She is aboard the bus and may have explosives strapped around her waist." "Get her off this vehicle, she may be lethal!" – another advises.

"I am not forcing anybody down who has paid the ticket!" – snaps the driver and reverts to the hazy windshield.

A stunned silence. They thought the driver was one of them, he doesn't appear to be a peacenik. Someone latches on to the frontal paned partition and expostulates. "It's not reasonable, your decision. Today, you never know. Even their women are into killing, I saw it with my own eyes in Lebanon. They explode themselves like nothing, not a problem..."

The woman who spotted the ostensible terrorist now badgers the driver:

"Give me your details. I am going to have a chat with your supervisors. You can forget about this cosy job of yours!"

The Arab stands mute, vigilantly monitoring the commotion. A passenger tilts and hisses in her ear: "Child murderer." She recoils from the gathering nightmare and bellows, addressing the jam-packed bus:

"I am a nurse. I tend to the sick and frail all day long, both ours and yours. Every day there's a flood of casualties. Our injured. Our corpses. Your injured. Your corpses. Children, women, shreds, all full of blood..." – She pauses – "Why do you treat me this way?"

Her Hebrew is rocky but sufficient to provoke a heated debate with supporters and detractors.

"What do you want with this woman? She is just an innocent commuter! Look at yourselves! You should be ashamed!"

Others are genuinely scared. I can see it on their faces, the white-knuckled way they cling to the metal railings opposite their seats, the evasive looks, the stooping shoulders, eyes buried in the filthy flooring.

She may well be a terrorist, who knows?

It is too late to smother this burgeoning conflagration. My neighbour exchanges heavy-accented verbal blows with someone behind us. Women accuse each other of hypocrisy and barbarism.

The driver, pretending to ignore us, head slanted, listens in and steals appreciative glances at his voluptuous fawner. To garner his further admiration, she plunges into the dispute, a brimstone diva with words of fire.

Some passengers begin to push the Arab and shove her with innocuous gestures of their sweaty palms. They endeavour to avoid her startled gaze. She tries again:

"What kind of people are you? I am a medical nurse, I am telling you. So what if I am Arab, is it automatic proof that I am a terrorist?"

My neighbour suddenly addresses me:

"You've got nothing to say?"

"To my mind, if she were a terrorist, she would have blown us all to kingdom come by now."

I let the impact of this sane reminder settle.

"This bus is bursting. The driver skipped a few stations on the way" – I remind them – "She is smack amidst us. She has no bags. She could have detonated herself and demolished us by now."

My neighbour slaps his thighs with furry hands, a sign of pleasure. I am on his side. Some voices crow, encouraging me to proceed: "Let him continue, go on."

But I have got nothing more to add and I grow silent.

The Arab scrutinises me doubtfully, not sure if she understood correctly. Do I suspect her of being a terrorist or don't I?

"And who might you be to tell us off, if I may?" – scoffs the woman who started it all. Her voice is screaming hoarse, her face aflame with stripes of lipstick smeared and make up oozing. Three golden bracelets clang the rhythm of her scornful question.

"He is a prisoner" – announces the driver's would-be floozy. She eyes both me and her desired conquest triumphantly. The driver studies her in his overhead mirror, then gives a haunted look. Control is lost. He knows it.

"An inmate" – shrieks the agitator for all the bus to hear – "The perfect couple! A felon and an Arab! Perhaps you are an Arab too?"

"I am not an Arab" – I respond calmly – "They are too well mannered for the likes of me and you."

She blows up:

"Son of a bitch, maniac, look who's talking!" – She leans towards me and scratches my face with broken, patchily varnished nails – "A prisoner piece of shit and whoring stench of an Arab stink up this bus!"

My neighbour half rises from our common seat, grabs her extended arm and affixes it firmly behind her back. She screams to her dumbfounded audience: "They are together in it, this entire group, and they are a menace. Driver, stop this instant, I want the police, now!"

I do not react. It was foolish of me to have partaken in this tiff in the first place. Prisoners involved in incidents of public unrest end up spending a week or more in the nearest squalid detention centre, away from the relative safety of the penitentiary. Anything can happen in these infernos of perspiring, drug-addicted flesh, those killing fields of haemorrhaging syringes, those purgatories of squeals and whimpers and shaking of the bars, draped tight in sooty air.

I spent a month in these conditions and was about to return, I feel convinced.

The driver brakes the bus, rises, and gestures to the Arab helplessly. She tries to extricate herself by moving towards his cubicle. Some women

mesh their hands, trapping her flapping arms, flailing about, her cheeks lattices of translucent rivulets. Her fear is audible in shallow exhalations.

But her captors persevere. They clench her scarf and the trimmings of her coat and twist them around the Arab's breathless neck.

The driver disembarks through the pneumatically susurrating doors. He walks the gravel path adjacent to the highway, desperately trying to wave down a passing car. Someone finally stops and they have a hushed exchange through a barricaded window. The hatchback cruises away.

The driver hesitates, his eyes glued to the receding vehicle. He contemplates the hostile bus with dread and climbs aboard. He sinks into his seat and sighs.

A patrol car arrives a few minutes later and disgorges two policemen. One elderly, stout and stilted, his face a venous spasm. He keeps feeling the worn butt of his undersized revolver. The other cop does the talking. He is lithe, a youth in camouflage, penumbral moustache, anorectic, sinewy hands, his eyes an adulterated cyan. He swells his chest and draws back his bony shoulders, attempting to conceal his meagreness.

"What's going on here?" – his voice a shocking bass. We are silenced by the contrast.

The instigator of the turmoil clears a path and fingers his oversized tunic as she volunteers:

"She is a terrorist and he is a convict and they were both planning to blow this bus up."

"Twaddle!" – roars my neighbour – "She is a hysterical, psychotic, panicky woman! Look what she did to his face!" – he points at me – "And that one, over there" – he singles the Arab out with a nail-bitten pinkie – "her only sin is that she is an Arab, a nurse or something, a fellow traveller, paid her ticket like all of us." The driver nods his assent.

"I am telling you..." – the stirrer yelps but the officer is terse:

"Continue behaving like this, lady, and it is you I will arrest for disturbing the peace..."

"Another mock cop" – she slurs, but her voice is hushed and hesitant.

"Perhaps even insulting a police officer on duty?" – the policeman hints and she is pacified, retreating, crablike, eyes downcast, towards her shopping.

"Who is the prisoner?" – the veteran cop enquires, his paw atop his gun, caressing it incessantly. I raise my hand.

"You are coming with us. The rest continue to your destinations. You too!" – he addresses the Arab, his civility offensively overstated.

"I want no problems here!" – he warns – "It's Friday, the Sabbath is upon us. Go home in peace. The police has more important things to do than to resolve your petty squabbles!"

Extracted from my window seat, their fingers vicelike under both armpits, they half drag me across my neighbour's knees, strewing all over him the contents of the plastic bag in which I keep my wallet and the weekend papers. It hurts.

We alight and the young one taps the folding exit doors. The bus drones its way into the snaring traffic jam. I watch its back as it recedes. The coppers place a pair of shiny handcuffs on my wrists and shackle my ankles too. I stumble towards the waiting squad car. They unlock the rear and gesture me to enter. They push me from behind and bolt the door. The gory rays of a setting sun dissect the murk inside.

I see the officers' backs and necks as they occupy the front seats beyond the meshed partition. One of them half turns and spits a snarl:

"My partner loves you, Arabs."

Only then, my eyes having adjusted, I notice the others in the stifling cabin I inhabit. They rattle their manacles and smile at me wolfishly, a toothy apparition.

"Where are you from, handsome?" – one asks and moves to flank me. His mitt is motionless on my knee.

He has an Arab accent.

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The Butterflies are Laughing

by Sam Vaknin

My parents' home, it is dusk time, and I am climbing to the attic. I settle on my childhood's sofa, whose unravelled corners reveal its faded and lumpy stuffing. The wooden armrests are dark and bear the scratchy marks of little hands. I contemplate these blemishes, set bright against the deep, brown planks, and am reminded of my past. A light ray meanders diagonally across the carpet. The air is Flemish. The fitting light, the shades, the atmosphere.

There is a watercolour on an easel of a thickset forest with towering and murky trees. A carriage frozen in a clearing, a burly driver, looking towards nowhere, as though there's nothing left to see. No light, no shadows, just a black-singed mass of foliage and an incandescent, sallow horse.

My little brother lies bleeding on the rug. Two gory rivulets, two injured wrists, delineate a perfect circle. They cross his ashen palms and waxen, twitching fingers. It may be a call for help but I have been hard of hearing.

I crouch beside him and inspect the wounds. They are shallow but profuse. Red pain has broken past his skin, his face is wrinkled. I wipe him gently, trying not to hurt.

He stares at me, eyes of a gammy colt awaiting the delivering shot. He radiates the kind of gloom that spans the room and makes me giddy. I cower to my heels, then squat beside him, caressing his silent scream. My palms are warm.

We while the time. His frothy exhalations, my measured air inhaled, our lungs entwined in the proliferating density. The volumes of my childhood mob the shelves, their bindings blue and rigid.

I look at him and tell him it's alright, he shouldn't worry. A mere nineteen, he gives me a senescent smile and nods in frailty. He grasps it all, too much. Shortly, I may have to lift him in my arms and set him on the couch. We are not alone. Echoes of people downstairs. I can't tell who. Mother, our sister, Nomi perhaps. Someone arrives and sparks excited speech and lengthy silences.

I descend the steps, some hasty greetings, I stuff a roll of coarse, green toilet paper in my pants. Back to the horror, to frisk around the crimson wreckage. I wipe my brother wrathfully from floor and carpet and from

couch, reducing him to a ubiquity of chestnut stains. I am not content. He is writhing on the inlay, attempting tears. It's futile, I know. We both forgot the art of crying, except from torn veins.

The light is waning. The brown blinds incarcerate my brother behind penumbral bars. His bony hands and scrawny body in stark relief. It is the first time that I observe him truly. He is lanky but his face unchanged. I was no child when he was born but he is still my little brother.

He is resting now, eyes shut, our lengthy lashes – both mine and his – attached to fluttering lids. Birds trapped in quivering arteries flap at his throat. He is sobbing still but I avert my gaze, afraid to hug him. We oscillate, like two charged particles, my little brother and myself. His arms by his side and my arms by his side, divergent. I thrust into my bulging pocket a ball of ruby paper.

There is a clock in here that ticks the seconds. They used to sound longer. It was another time. The haemorrhage stopped. A mournful lace of plasma on his sinewed wrists. It must have hurt, the old corroded blade, no flesh, just coated skeleton. To saw the bones till blood. To hack the skin, to spread it like a rusty butterfly, dismantling slithery vessels. I move to occupy the wooden ladder back, near the escritoire that I received as gift on the occasion of my first year in school.

He nods affirmative when asked if he can rise. I hold him under hairy, damp armpits. I confront him, seated on my grandma's rocking chair, a cushion clad in Moroccan equine embroidery on my knees. I gently hold his hand and he recoils. I didn't hurt him, though.

I wait for him to break, his hand in mine. Thus clenched, our palms devoid of strength, we face a question and a promise, the fear of pain and of commitment. We dwell on trust.

He unfists and bleeds anew. I use the paper ball to soak it up. It's dripping. I gallop down the spiral staircase and collect another roll, adhesive bandages, and dressing. Into my pocket and, speechlessly, I climb back. He is sitting there, a Pharaonic scribe, wrists resting on his knees, palms lotus flowers, but upturned. His gifted painter's fingers are quenched in blood.

I mop and dab, swab and discard, apply some pressure and erase. My brother is calling me in sanguineous tongue and I deface it, incapable of listening, unwilling to respond.

I bind him and I dress and he opens his eyes and gapes at the white butterflies that sprouted on his joints. He feels them tenderly, astonished by this sudden red-white beauty.

I count his pulse and he gives in to my pseudo-professional mannerisms. His pulse is regular. He hasn't lost a lot of blood, therefore.

He tells me he is OK now and asks for water. All of a sudden, I remember. One day, he was a toddler, could hardly walk, I led him back

from the clinic. He gave blood and was weeping bitterly. A giant cotton swab was thrust into his elbow pit and he folded his arm, holding onto it tightly.

One jerky movement, it fell and he stood there, gawking at the soiled lump and whimpering. He was so tiny that I hugged him and wiped the tears from his plump cheeks.

I improvised a story about "Adhesa Cottonball", the cotton monster, who forever wishes to return to the soil, her abode. His eyes cleared and he giggled nervously. This sound – his chuckle – is in my ears, obscuring all real-life acoustics.

He gulps down the water silently, his eyes a distant blackness, where no one treads but he, his forest, among the trees, perhaps this carriage and its attending coachman. Where does he want to go, I wonder?

My brain is working overtime. My skull-domiciled well-oiled machine, whose parts are in metallic shine, impeccable, unerring, impervious to pain. Machines don't ache this brother, sprawled on the couch, his shoulders stooping, in torn shirt and tattered trousers, my erstwhile clothes, his chest hirsute, his face adorned with budding beard and whiskers.

What story shall I tell him now to clear his eyes? How shall I make him laugh again? What monster should I bury in the sand?

I tell him to pack few things and come with me. He acquiesces but still won't budge. His twin wrist-butterflies are quite inert. He sighs as he buttons his shirt and rolls unfastened sleeves to cover his abrasions. When he gets up I see him as before: a gangling figure, an angular face, two cavernous sockets, big brown mole. He drags his feet.

We both descend. Don't tell our parents, he begs, I promise not to. Enters his room and exits fast, carrying a small plastic bag with severed handles. A pair of worn jeans spill from the top to cover some half-deleted lettering.

We bid farewell and walk placidly to the car. He freezes on the back seat, still cradling his plastic treasure, gazing forward but seeing little.

Nomi is driving while I watch him through the windshield mirror. His inanimate stare, directed at the window, is deflected by transparency. Slumped on the imitation leather seat, he and his trousers bump from one side to another on the winding road.

He falls asleep this way, sack closely clutched, chin burrowing into his hollow torso. At times, he shakes his head in stiff refusal. He is very adamant. Only his hands are calm, as though detached from his rebellious body.

Nomi is negotiating the parking and I touch his shoulder. He opens a pair of bleary eyes and looks at me like he used to when I was still his entire world. I touch once more and gently. When he was two years old, I left home for many years, never to be heard from. The hurt resides still in his eyes, that injury.

I touch a third time, thus pledging to remain, thus telling him my love. I study him at length and he does not divert his eyes.

Suddenly he smiles and dimples collect around his lips. He flings his hands high up and waves his red-white butterflies. He imitates their flight. He plucks their wings. He laughs and I respond by laughing and Nomi joins and the space of our car is filled with laughs and butterflies and butterflies and laughter.

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The Con Man Cometh

By Sam Vaknin

Swathed in luminosity, we stir with measured competence our amber drinks in long-stemmed glasses. You are weighing my offer and I am waiting for your answer with hushed endurance. The armchairs are soft, the lobby is luxurious, as befits five-star hotels. I am not tense. I have anticipated your response even before I made my move.

Soon, temples sheathed in perspiration, you use the outfit's thick paper napkins to wipe it off. Loosen your tie. Pretend to be immersed in calculations. You express strident dissatisfaction and I feign recoil, as though intimidated by your loudness. Withdrawing to my second line of defence, I surrender to your simulated wrath.

The signs are here, the gestures, the infinitesimal movements that you cannot control. I lurk. I know that definite look, that imperceptible twitch, the inevitability of your surrender.

I am a con man and you are my victim. The swindle is unfolding here and now, in this very atrium, amid all the extravagance. I am selling your soul and collecting the change. I am sharpened, like a raw nerve firing impulses to you, receiving yours, an electrical-chemical dialog, consisting of your smelly sweat, my scented exudation. I permeate your cracks. I broker an alliance with your fears, your pains, defence compensatory mechanisms.

I know you.

I've got to meld us into one. As dusk gives way to night, you trust me as you do yourself, for now I am nothing less than you. Having adopted your particular gesticulation, I nod approvingly with every mention of your family. You do not like me. You sense the danger. Your nostrils flare. Your eyes amok. Your hands so restless. You know me for a bilker, you realise I'll break your heart. I know you comprehend we both are choiceless.

It's not about money. Emotions are at stake. I share your depths of loneliness and pain. Sitting opposed, I see the child in you, the adolescent. I discern the pleading sparkle in your eyes, your shoulders stooping in the very second you've decided to succumb. I am hurting for what I do to you. My only consolation is the inexorability of nature – mine and yours, this

world's (in which we find ourselves and not of our choice). Still, we are here, you know.

I empathise with you without speech or motion. Your solitary sadness, the anguish, and your fears. I am your only friend, monopolist of your invisible cries, your inner haemorrhage of salty tears, the tissue scar that has become your being. Like me, the product of uncounted blows (which you sometimes crave).

Being abused is being understood, having some meaning, forming a narrative. Without it, your life is nothing but an anecdotal stream of randomness. I deal the final, overwhelming coup-de-grace that will transform the torn sheets of your biography into a plot. It isn't everyday one meets a cheat. Such confident encounters can render everything explained. Don't give it up. It is a gift of life, not to be frivolously dispensed with. It is a test of worthiness.

I think you qualify and I am the structure and the target you've been searching for and here I am.

Now we are bound by money and by blood. In our common veins flows the same alliance that dilates our pupils. We hail from one beginning. We separated only to unite, at once, in this hotel, this late, and you exclaim: "I need to trust you like I do not trust a soul". You beseech me not to betray your faith. Perhaps not so explicitly, but both your eyes are moist, reflecting your vulnerability.

I gravely radiate my utter guarantee of splendid outcomes. No hint of treason here. Concurrently I am plotting your emotional demise. At your request, not mine. It is an act of amity, to rid you of the very cause of your infirmity. I am the instrument of your delivery and liberation. I will deprive you of your ability to feel, to trust, and to believe. When we diverge, I will have moulded you anew – much less susceptible, much more immune, the essence of resilience.

It is my gift to you and you are surely grateful in advance. Thus, when you demand my fealty, you say: "Do not forget our verbal understanding."

And when I vow my loyalty, I answer: "I shall not forget to stab you in the back."

And now, to the transaction. I study you. I train you to ignore my presence and argue with yourself with the utmost sincerity. I teach you not to resent your weaknesses.

So, you admit to them and I record all your confessions to be used against you to your benefit. Denuded of defences, I leave you wounded by embezzlement, a cold, contemptible exposure. And, in the meantime, it's only warmth and safety, the intimacy of empathy, the propinquity of mutual understanding.

I only ask of you one thing: the fullest trust, a willingness to yield. I remember having seen the following in an art house movie, it was a test: to

fall, spread-eagled from a high embankment and to believe that I am there to catch you and break your lethal plunge.

I am telling you I'll be there, yet you know I won't. Your caving in is none of my concern. I only undertook to bring you to the brink and I fulfilled this promise. It's up to you to climb it, it's up to you to tumble. I must not halt your crash, you have to recompose. It is my contribution to the transformation that metastasised in you long before we met.

But you are not yet at the stage of internalising these veracities. You still naively link feigned geniality to constancy, intimacy and confidence in me and in my deeds, proximity and full disclosure. You are so terrified and mutilated, you come devalued. You cost me merely a whiskey tumbler and a compendium of ordinary words. One tear enough to alter your allegiances. You are malleable to the point of having no identity.

You crave my touch and my affection. I crave your information and unbridled faith. "Here is my friendship and my caring, my tenderness and amity, here is a hug. I am your parent and your shrink, your buddy and your family" – so go the words of this inaudible dialog – "Give me your utter, blind, trust but limit it to one point only: your money or your life."

I need to know about your funds, the riddles of your boardroom, commercial secrets, your skeletons, some intimate detail, a fear, resurgent hatred, the envy that consumes. I don't presume to be your confidant. Our sharing is confined to the pecuniary. I lull you into the relief that comes with much reduced demands. But you are an experienced businessman! You surely recognise my tactics and employ them, too!

Still, you are both seduced and tempted, though on condition of maintaining "independent thinking". Well, almost independent. There is a tiny crack in your cerebral armour and I am there to thrust right through it. I am ready to habituate you. "I am in full control" – you'd say – "So, where's the threat?" And, truly, there is none.

There's only certainty. The certitude I offer you throughout our game. Sometimes I even venture: "I am a crook to be avoided". You listen with your occidental manners, head tilted obliquely, and when I am finished warning you, you say: "But where the danger lies? My trust in you is limited!" Indeed – but it is there!

I lurk, awaiting your capitulation, inhabiting the margins, the twilight zone twixt greed and paranoia. I am a viral premonition, invading avaricious membranes, preaching a gospel of death and resurrection. Your death, your rising from the dead. Assuming the contours of my host, I abandon you deformed in dissolution.

There's no respite, not even for a day. You are addicted to my nagging, to my penetrating gaze, instinctive sympathy, you're haunted. I don't let go. You are engulfed, cocooned, I am a soul mate of eerie insight, unselfish

acumen. I vitiate myself for your minutest needs. I thrive on servitude. I leave no doubt that my self-love is exceeded only by my love for you.

I am useful and you are a user. I am available and you avail yourself. But haven't you heard that there are no free lunches? My restaurant is classy, the prices most exorbitant, the invoices accumulate with every smile, with every word of reassurance, with every anxious inquiry as to your health, with every sacrifice I make, however insubstantial.

I keep accounts in my unstated books and you rely on me for every double entry. The voices I instill in you: "He gives so of himself though largely unrewarded". You feel ashamed, compelled to compensate. A seed of Trojan guilt. I harp on it by mentioning others who deprived me. I count on you to do the rest. There's nothing more potent than egotistic love combined with raging culpability. You are mine to do with as I wish, it is your wish that I embody and possess.

The vise is tightened. Now it's time to ponder whether to feed on you at once or scavenge. You are already dying and in your mental carcass I am grown, an alien. Invoking your immunity, as I am wont to do, will further make you ill and conflict will erupt between your white cells and your black, the twin abodes of your awakened feelings.

You hope against all odds that I am a soul-mate. How does it feel, the solitude? Few days with me – and you cannot recall! But I cannot remember how it feels to be together. I cannot waive my loneliness, my staunch companion. When I am with you, it prospers. And you must pay for that.

I have no choice but to abscond with your possessions, lest I remain bereft. With utmost ethics, I keep you well-informed of these dynamics and you acknowledge my fragility which makes you desirous to salve my wounds.

But I maintain the benefit of your surprise, the flowing motion. Always at an advantage over you, the interchangeable. I, on the other hand, cannot be replaced, as far as you're concerned. You are a loyal subject of your psychic state while I am a denizen of the eternal hunting grounds. No limits there, nor boundaries, only the nostrils quivering at the game, the surging musculature, the body fluids, the scent of decadence.

Sometime, the prey becomes the predator, but only for a while. Admittedly, it's possible and you might turn the tables. But you don't want to. You crave so to be hunted. The orgiastic moment of my proverbial bullets penetrating willing flesh, the rape, the violation, the metaphoric blood and love, you are no longer satisfied with compromises.

You want to die having experienced this eruption once. For what is life without such infringement if not mere ripening concluding in decay. What sets us, Man, apart from beast is our ability to self-deceive and swindle

others. The rogue's advantage over quarry is his capacity to have his lies transmuted till you believe them true.

I trek the unpaved pathways between my truth and your delusions. What am I, fiend or angel? A weak, disintegrating apparition – or a triumphant growth? I am devoid of conscience in my own reflection. It is a cause for mirth. My complex is binary: to fight or flight, I'm well or ill, it should have been this way or I was led astray.

I am the blinding murkiness that never sets, not even when I sleep. It overwhelms me, too, but also renders me farsighted. It taught me my survival: strike ere you are struck, abandon ere you're trashed, control ere you are subjugated.

So what do you say to it now? I told you everything and haven't said a word. You knew it all before. You grasp how dire my need is for your blood, your hurt, the traumatic coma that will follow. They say one's death bequeaths another's life. It is the most profound destination, to will existence to your pining duplicate.

I am plump and short, my face is uncontrived and smiling. When I am serious, I am told, I am like a battered and deserted child and this provokes in you an ancient cuddling instinct. When I am proximate, your body and your soul are unrestrained. I watch you kindly and the artificial lighting of this magnific vestibule bounces off my glasses.

My eyes are cradled in blackened pouches of withered skin. I draw your gaze by sighing sadly and rubbing them with weary hands. You incline our body, gulp the piquant libation, and sign the document. Then, leaning back, you shut exhausted eyes. There is no doubt: you realise your error.

It's not too late. The document lies there, it's ready for the tearing. But you refrain. You will not do it.

"Another drink?" – You ask.

I smile, my chubby cheeks and wire glasses sparkle.

"No, thanks" – I say.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[*A Letter about Trust*](#)

[*The Gradations of Abuse*](#)

[*Abusing the Gullible Narcissist*](#)

[*The Fabric of Economic Trust*](#)

[*The Enigma of Normal People*](#)

The Narcissist's Victims

The Narcissist's Confabulated Life

The Talented Mr. Ripley

The Narcissist in Court

Grandiosity Hangover and Narcissistic Baiting

The Shadowy World of International Finance

The Typology of financial scandals

Market Impeders and Market Inefficiencies

The Extramarital Narcissist

Dr. Jackal and Mr. Hide

The Silver Pieces of the Narcissist

The Misanthropic Altruist

The Objects of the Narcissist

The Inanimate as a Source of Narcissistic Supply

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

This part is meant only to provoke thoughts. It is not a substitute to independent thinking, criticism, and analysis.

Are all narcissists con-artists? Do they all abuse their victims' trust?

Why do victims trust narcissists in the first place?

Do narcissists think that their victims "had it coming" and "deserve what they get"?

Who is the narcissist in the story? Perhaps both protagonists are?

What is the special significance of money to the narcissist?

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Janusz Courts Dinah

by Sam Vaknin

Read the [Hebrew original](#).

Janusz thrusts his head through the illuminated window, deep into the house, his desperate shadow bedaubed across the wall. We shelter Dinah, a chimera of heads and bodies, protecting her from Janusz, from his love, from his contorted face, as he bawls, in his intellectual accent:

"But I want Dinah, let me speak with Dinah!"

Dinah's face alight, attainted red. It has been a long time since she was wooed so forcefully. Janusz, consumed by twilight, bellowing ignominiously in public. It flatters her, evoking stirrings she can recognise. She giggles uncomfortably, a beauty framed in silky skin and pearly teeth.

Janusz sits by day on colour-peeling, fading benches. His body arched with twanging dignity, his equine face buried in a thickset tome, exaggerated eyes peering through the magnifying lenses of his gold-rimmed glasses. From time to time, he chases a dogged, greasy curl away from his alpestrine forehead.

It was this expansive brow that most impressed me as a child. A swathe, pulsating in venous green, a milky desert, crisscrossed with brittle capillaries and strewn with bony rocks. Beneath this tract was Janusz: his wondering eyes, penumbral sockets, and slithering hair.

When he summoned Dinah, his face erupted into creases, as wastelands do before the rain. "Go away, crazy one" – my grandma, Dinah's mother, used to shout at him half-heartedly, as she shuttered the rickety windows. But even Janusz, who I, informed by hindsight, now know to have been really cracked – even he perceived my grandma's protests as eccentrically veiled summonses.

Grinning, he would press his face against the frozen casement, his Hellenic nose made into a bulbous offering, befogged, only his toothy smile remains, then gone.

The Seder was often celebrated at my grandparents. Tables colluded under shimmering white clothes, bleached by my grandma in plastic vessels. Matzos and wine bottles served porcelain and crystal bowls with scarlet sparkles. My mother and my father observed, dejected, from the corners of the room, two strangers in an intimate occasion.

My parents, unloved, rejected by both progenitors and progeny, clinging together, having survived their families. With eyes downcast, hands sculpting breadcrumbs or folding and unfolding wrinkled napkins, they silently cruised through the night, tight-lipped and stiff.

It was an awry evening. My grandpa, drowsed by medication, ensconced in sleepy, torn pyjamas, read the Haggadah perfunctorily. We devoured the food doled out by my grandma from steamy, leaden pots. We ate with bated silence, a choir of cutlery and chomp. Immersed in yellow lighting, we cast our shadows at each other. A tiny wooden bird sprang forth, recounting time from a cuckoo clock my father gifted to my grandparents.

Still silent, my grandma and my aunts began to clear the table, when Janusz implored Dinah, from the windowpane, to exit and meet him in the dusk. My grandmother didn't utter a single syllable as she fastened the blinders in his face. Janusz whimpered. The stillness was only interrupted by the clattering plates and the whishing sounds of lacey aprons.

Until the door, forced open, let in a tremulous Janusz, his shoulders stooping, his head askance, filling the frame with writhing apprehension and zealous hope. The door – two planks adjoined with sawdust – protested but Janusz didn't budge. His forehead sketched with rain-drenched hair, his eyes exuding watery anticipation, he stood there, sculpting with his twitchy hands an airy bust of Dinah. The odours of decaying food and festering sweat mingled with the crispness of the drizzle.

He tore her name from tortured chest: "DINAH!!!"

The women stifled a fearful shriek. The giant Janusz filled the room as he progressed in pilgrimage towards Dinah, his sinewy hands extended, the muscles rippling in his arms. There and then, we in the role of silent witnesses, he courted her, quoting from Kafka and Freud and Tolstoy. That night he called upon the spirits of his library, whose books he romanced on benches under all the lampposts in the township's parks. He sang her arias and, for a moment, he carried her away from us. His reputation was cemented by this nocturnal recital. We didn't understand a word he said, his music fell on arid ears.

My mother beseeched him softly, shocking us all:

"Go away, Janusz, Dinah is tired."

It was the first thing she said that evening. She then stood up, stretching her pygmy frame, pinning on Janusz her kaleidoscopic brown-green gaze. Her hair braked, cropped, atop her shoulders. Janusz, taken aback, studied her as one would an exotic species. His hands, two violent spirals, breached desperately the musty air. My mother stepped up to him and, looking into befuddled eyes, she reiterated her pleading command:

"Go away, Janusz" – and, then, soothingly – "Dinah will see you tomorrow."

Janusz's body crumbled. His shoulders bowed, he took his glasses off, withdrew a patterned flannel shirt from his trousers and polished them meticulously. His lake-blue eyesight fluttered. He placed his eyecups back, forgetting to restore his attire.

"I only want to talk to her" – he protested tamely – "I only want to tell her to marry me because I love her."

My mother nodded understandingly:

"This is not the time. You must go now. It is Passover, the Seder night, and you are intruding."

He reciprocated miserably and retreated crab-like, sideways, afraid to turn his back on the hostile room.

Dinah watched him from the kitchen, numbed. She absentmindedly arranged her hair and tightened the dull apron around her narrow waist. She pulled her blouse to carve her breasts, and, to adjust her stocking, she stretched a bronzed and streamlined leg.

Janusz gulped these inadvertent sights, quenching a burgeoning lust.

My mother repeated with irrevocable finality:

"Goodbye, Janusz!"

Awakened and subdued, he headed for the exit.

Then Dinah exclaimed:

"Janusz, wait, I will come with you!"

She hurled the balled apron at us and went and flanked Janusz, provocatively linking arms with him. Janusz stiffened, eyes tensely shut, afraid to shatter this dream of Dinah by his side. My mother fired a glaucous look at her sister, turned her back effusively, and sank into her chair, deflated. Janusz extended one leg towards the exit and Dinah somnambulated after him. Thus, torturously, they vanished into the murky, thunderstruck, outside, leaving the door ajar to the rain sprays and ozone smell of a gathering storm.

All the adults commenced and ceased to speak at once. My grandfather snored, his breath deflected by his sprawling chin, fluttering among the white curls on his denuded chest. My grandma concealed him in a tattered afghan and sat beside him, fingering a bracelet helplessly. One of my uncles cleared his throat in bass, regretted this promised speech, and slumped into his chair. They all eyed my father, the oldest and most experienced among them. But he kept mum.

They sat there for a while. My father tore apart the shutters and squinted in a futile effort to discern something in the gloom. The streetlamps were few and far between and the tepid lighting of the Seder barely brightened the room's far corners, let alone the alleyway.

The young ones dozed, bowing to soiled plates, their crumpled, stained, cloth bibs bobbing in a sea of matzo crumbs.

"Hard-headed" – muttered my grandma and my mother assented absentmindedly. Someone brought my grandma a glass of water. She dipped her lips and crusty tongue and smacked. "Maybe we should call the police" – ventured another uncle of mine, but we knew this was a non-starter.

Dinah got divorced in her early twenties, abandoned by her husband. She found refuge in her parents' home and cared for them and for those of her siblings who still resided there. She scuffed the floor and scrubbed the dishes. In the evenings, she settled down, legs crossed beneath her wearily, gazing at life unfolding from the porch, puffing at a medley of fidgety cigarettes. She had the dead countenance of the introspective. We tiptoed around her and soothingly vilified her former husband to her face.

At first, she clung to life. She raised a son and daughter in the squalid quarters of her parents. But when her daughter succumbed to leukemia, she was a broken vessel. She shipped her son to a foster family in a Kibbutz and sought employment in a hospice for the terminally ill. There, among the dead and dying, she spent most of her time, often napping, in between shifts, in a bed still sweating of its former, now deceased, occupant. Or she would sprawl on an operating table, among blood spattered bandages and slabs of sanguinary flesh in overflowing buckets.

She rarely returned to her parents now, to assume her tiny chamber, with its monastic bed, and ramshackle dresser. She has not dated, neither has she been with a man since her divorce.

And now, this, into the night with the deranged and violent Janusz, who wastes his time on books, on public benches in twilight parks. What could he do to her?

"A beautiful woman is only trouble" – someone said and everyone hummed in consent.

"Poor Dinah" – sighed another aunt, summing in these three syllables her entire shrivelling misery.

It was stuffy and men wiped foreheads with blemished handkerchiefs, doffing synthetic shirts imbrued with perspiration. Someone turned on the radio and off again. Others pressed frayed rags against the leaking window frames.

"She is not herself since Sima died" – my grandmother intoned in vacant words. No one mentioned Uzi, Dinah's only son, my cousin, my friend, irrevocably adopted now. I thought to myself: Dinah may be sad on his account as well. No one suggested that she misses him as badly as she does her daughter and her husband, who deserted her, amidst this budding emptiness, without saying why.

Mother served a round of roasting, grainy coffee, in tiny demitasses. A symphony of smacking lips and groans of pleasure followed.

"What are we to do now?" – my grandma said, her voice monotonous, her fingers curled around the trimmings of her dress – "She eloped with this madman. What's wrong with her? She has a handsome, clever child, a warm home, a steady job."

My mother stared at her and then away. My uncle, Gabi, said: "There's more to life than these."

"What more is there to life?" – erupted my grandma, approaching him with scorching eyes – "What do you have in yours? Do you have a wife, a home, or children? Almost thirty years old and still a toddler, unemployed, subsisting on the marrow of this old man here..."

My uncle, springing to his feet, circumnavigated the table to face my grandma and then, his mind changed, he exited the house, banging the door behind him wrathfully.

"I also must go" – mumbled his younger brother awkwardly – "My friends are waiting. We are going to have us a good time in the square, we..." – and he ran out tearfully.

Mother peered at the orphaned coffee cups and sipped from hers. She poured my father some more, avoiding his searching gaze.

"Never works, he is killing his old man, destroying his life" – my grandma repeated disparagingly. My mother nodded.

My father said:

"The aluminium here must be painted, it's all so rusty. I can do it for you on Saturday."

No one responded. Someone flattened a mosquito between two palms and studied the bloodied outcome.

"It's tough to be alone" – Aliza blurted – "She has no man and Sima dead and Uzi..."

"I am alone" – Nitzkhia countered.

"I hope she doesn't do anything stupid" – my father cautioned no one in particular – "This Janusz is a nutcase."

"He loves her" – Aliza said with wistful confidence – "He will not harm her."

"The worst is when you love" – my mother said – "The worst crimes are passionate."

She jumped to her feet and hurried to the kitchen to rid her dress of a budding coffee stain.

My father examined the shutters closely, unfurling them and back. "Stop that" – my mother sniped at him and he collapsed into his chair, embarrassed.

"It's late" – Nitzkhia said – "Maybe we should fan out and look for Dinah."

"She'll be back" – my mother reassured her nervously, fighting a losing battle with the spot – "She has nowhere else to go. He shares the same

room with his mother. She watches over him relentlessly. If you ask me, there is something unhealthy going on between these two. No wonder he is like that."

"God" – exhaled my grandma – "I hate to imagine what the neighbours will invent: the two, alone, on the Seder night, in a public park..."

"He is a good person, this poor guy, he wouldn't harm a fly, how could anyone believe that they ... together ... I am not sure he could do it even if he knew what to do..." – Aliza laughed heartily, exposing equine teeth, and waving back a mane of waning blonde.

Everyone brayed and then earnestness reasserted itself. Dinah still hasn't returned and she was out there, with Janusz.

"I have cookies in sugar or in honey" – my grandma chuntered and motioned to the kitchen listlessly. My mother and Aliza rushed to fetch two outsized bowls containing triangular pastry floating in a golden syrupy lake.

"I still think that we should go out and look for her" – Nitzkhia insisted dreamily.

"Let's start to clear the table" – my mother instructed me and my sister. We helped her carry greasy plates and cutlery and shapeless napkins to the kitchen and pile them there indiscriminately. Mother rolled up her sleeves, donned a checkered pinafore, and started to scour away the evening with minimal, efficient moves.

"Mother" – I said meekly – "we haven't sung the Passover hymns."

She rinsed the dishes emphatically and used a drab cloth towel to dry them.

"Mother" – I persisted – "It is not the same without the signing." I liked to chime in and yodel the refrains.

"Well, I think we will be on our way now" – I heard Aliza from the other room. Nitzkhia had nowhere to go back to, she lived with my grandfather and grandmother.

"Mother" – I was panicky now, but I knew not why – "Gabi and Itsik have gone and now Aliza, too! No one is left!"

My mother froze and then, bending towards me, she tousled my hair, her hand all wet and soapy.

I shut my eyes and opened them repeatedly to repel her rivulets of stinging water. I was crying now and my sobbing swelled in me and I was swept in frazzled tremulousness, wiping my running nose on the back of a sullied hand. My younger sister retreated to the corner, kneeling, and snivelled inaudibly.

Mother just stood there, hands airborne, observing us in anxious helplessness. She tried to utter something but it came out a feeble "Don't you cry now, children" – my father glided from the adjacent room and

leaned a naked, bronze, shoulder on the doorframe, his face a sad and distant mask.

"Why are they crying?" – he enquired no one in particular.

"Because we didn't sing the Passover hymns" – my mother countered in a stifled voice.

Father knelt and cradled me in his arms. He embarked on a monotonous Moroccan tune, until my tears subsided and, enraptured by the distant melody, I fell silent. I joined him in a seamless medley of Passover hymns, my voice lachrymose and screeching. My mother reverted to her chores by the basin and Sima, my sister, absorbed it all in her usual mousy taciturnity.

Father held my hand in his spacious, warm palm and led me back to the table, chanting all the way and rhythmically pressing my flesh, spurring me on to join him. We were the only two singing, now in hushed voices, not to wake my grandpa. My sister climbed onto my father's knee, her scalp safely ensconced in his moustache, head nodding to her chest, eyelids undulating dreams.

"We are going" – reiterated Aliza. She arose and straightened an erstwhile festive dress. As she was circling the table, Dinah barged in and hesitated by the threshold, prodded inside by the rain that drenched us all. An invisible hand shut the door behind her.

She was soaked, her hair in ropy waterfalls, her clothes an aqueous pulp, her wide feet bare. She gravitated towards a vacant chair and folded, planted in a swelling puddle.

My mother, exiting the kitchen, stared at her, alarmed.

"Where were you?" – demanded my grandmother bleakly.

Dinah shrugged. "We strolled in the public park. We walked a lot. He talked to me. His speech is beautiful, like a gentleman's. He is wise and erudite. He speaks six languages."

"Then he is definitely not for you" – my grandma interrupted rudely – "We have enough whackos in the family."

Dinah shivered. "He is not a whacko, don't call him that!"

My mother served her scalding coffee and my grandmother kept mumbling crabbily: "He is not for you, Donna. You forget about him this very instant!"

Dinah sipped the beverage, her eyes occluding pleasurably. She unwrapped them, green and crystalline, and said: "It all remains to be seen. It all remains to be seen."

My grandma grumbled despondently and gestured dismissively at Dinah's optimism: "As you have ill-chosen your first one, so shall you cherry-pick your second one, no doubt. Good for nothings. Only trouble and heartbreak await you."

And my mother said:

"Come children, let us go home. This is an adult conversation" – as she fired a cautionary glance at the interlocutors.

"Let them sleep in my room" – Dinah said – "Sometimes even adults have to talk."

"We all eat what we cook" – my mother sniggered – "Dating someone like that is like laying your bed with sheets of misfortune and blankets of unhappiness. Just don't come to us complaining that we haven't forewarned you."

"I never came to you for anything, let alone complaining" – retorted Dinah bitterly – "And not that I had nothing to complain about."

"What now?" – Aliza asked, still on her ostensible way out – "What have you decided?"

"What is there to decide after one evening together?" – riposted Dinah.

"Will you go on seeing him?" – Nitzkhia challenged her.

"I think I will" – responded Dinah ponderously – "I had a pleasant and interesting time tonight. He is a charming man and I don't care how he appears to you."

"He is insane" – my grandma groaned – "And you are even nuttier if you consider dating him again. In any case, you are through with us. Take your belongings and let us see the last of you if you intend to follow through with this disgrace."

Dinah trembled, chewing on her upper lip to refrain from crying. "You would have not spoken like that if daddy were awake" – she spluttered.

"You heard me?" – my grandma sniped at her, coughing and massaging her chest, fending off an imminent demise – "From tomorrow, find yourself another place!"

A distant mannish voice trilled opera arias. It approached, bathing the room and us, and Janusz knocked on the wooden shutters and called:

"Dinah, can I tell you something?"

And again:

"Dinah, can you come out for a moment?"

A tentative knock.

Dinah half-rose, supported by the armrests.

"Dinah?" – Janusz's voice, astounded, invaded by its onetime stutter – "Do you hear me? Are you there?" My grandmother fixated Dinah with a tocsin look. Dinah stumbled towards the door, entranced, her hand extended, her mouth agape but speechless. She then sealed both her eyes and mouth and, thus, stood frozen, heaving imperceptibly.

"Dinah" – spurted Janusz – "I love you, I have always loved you, don't be cruel to me, I just want to tell you one little thing, one minute of your life, make it one second" – he paused and then – "I respect you greatly. We can talk through the window curtains. You do not have to come out to me."

Two tearful tributaries, two becks of salty rain, carved up Dinah's features. She returned to her seat, burying her oval countenance in futile hands.

Sighing deeply, my grandma neared the window. She propped herself against the soggy panes and through the fastened blinds she bellowed:

"Go away! Away from here, you crazy fool!"

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My Affair with Jesus

By Sam Vaknin

Read the [Hebrew original](#).

Losing my mind in a bed-sitter. Pipes crackling in the kitchenette, spewing faecal water in the bathroom, only the urinal a tolerable translucence. The cramped space is consumed by a rough-hewn timber bed, prickly wool blankets strewn. The sheets a crumpled ball, spotted with ageing spittle stains. The window looks onto another window. Mine is a corporate apartment in Geneva, a menacing physical presence of solitude and silence crystallised.

On weekend mornings I promenade at length: along the lake shores, traverse the foothills, the sumptuous mansions of the rich, back through the marina and the slums, behind the "Noga-Hilton".

On my return, the flat contracts, the standard issue table, the single chair, my scattered clothing, the metered rotary dial phone, the French and German television channels I cannot understand.

Once weekly, on Monday morns, a woman comes to clean. Her legs are cast in limpid stockings, I smell her cleanser perspiration. A coarse elastic reins her stonewashed hair. She is not bejewelled. She wears a pair of twisted wire-rims. Her husband sometimes tags along, buried under her scrubbing implements.

She hardly ever acknowledges my cornered and abashed existence, like a besuited mummy with gleaming imitation leather shoes. She does my laundry and my ironing, too.

I did not want to die. I sought refuge in numbers, solace in propinquity. I thought I'd join the Jesuits.

I strolled to the United Nations building and met a senior bureaucrat, a member of the order. His angled modest office overlooked a busy "work-in-progress" intersection, but he renounced this distraction. He listened to my well-rehearsed oration and referred me to a monastery at the other end of town.

Ambling along the waterfront, I scrutinised the flower beds, the tourists, and the spout. Even at dusk, I found this city languid.

All shops were closed.

I had a dinner date with a Londoner, a naturalised Iranian oil trader. Throughout the meal he kept rebuking me:

"You sound like someone whose life is long behind him. It is not true! You are so young!"

I drove my shrimps amongst the Thousand Islands in my bowl.

"You are observant, Sir" – I said – "but wrong. I may be possessed of past, but not of future" – I gauged the impact of my harsh pronouncement – "Not necessarily a thing to mourn" – I added.

He rearranged the remnants of his dinner on his soiled plate. I gathered that he was far too experienced to be optimistic.

I visited the friary next morning. A young monk, clad in sportswear eyed me with surprise. I mentioned my referrer and was instantly admitted. We occupied a metal bench amidst a bustling corridor.

He told me about the order. They study several years, embark on charitable missions in far-flung countries, and then take vows.

I reassured him I was celibate and he pretended to believe me.

Gene called and invited me to his bookstore to inspect a new shipment. I used to spend all weekends there, reading, socialising, and devouring unwholesome food in the adjacent restaurant. Shoppers came and went. Gene would register the day's meagre intake in his books and lock the entrance door. Sometimes we would proceed to patronise an Old City coffeehouse. But usually I would return to my alcove and wait for Monday.

That day, when I arrived, Gene offered me a cup of lukewarm coffee and said: "Stay with me, please, this evening."

The last client having departed, he bolted the iron shutters and we proceeded uptown, to get drunk. It was a farewell sacrament, Gene having lost his savings and a lot of other people's funds.

He climbed to my apartment and wept throughout the night of his intoxicated desperation. I woke to find him gone.

Thus, my world narrowed. The weather chilled. I couldn't pierce the stubborn rainfall that swathed my windowpanes. Arrayed in heavy overcoat, I sat, a patchwork quilt of light and shade. Or fully dressed, prostrated, the blankets heaped, on my Procrustean bed.

People from Israel stayed at my place. They ate my food and slept and showered. Then they moved off. I travelled back there on vacation. A journalist who did my profile years ago, refused to interview me. He said: "Dead horses do not make a story." My nightmares swelled with equine carcasses discharging jets of ink-black blood.

Come winter, I called on the priory again.

"You must first see the light, see Jesus" – my youthful guide insisted but, ready with a riposte, I rejoined:

"There are many paths to one's salvation and one's saviour."

Savouring my worn platitude, he promised to arrange for an interview in Zurich, the regional headquarters.

So many years have passed since then.

Perhaps a dream, perhaps a motion picture snippet, perhaps I am overwhelmed by one of my confabulations. I remember descending from a train, ankle-high in rustling snow, treading uncharted tracks towards an illuminated building, a boarding school. The manageress conducts a prideful tour of speckled premises. Toddlers in flowery pyjamas amuse themselves with ligneous cubes and plastic toys.

I can't remember if I have never been there.

That morning, in Zurich, I climbed up a hill, next to the colossal railway, and rang an ornate bell at the gate of an unassuming office building. I was let into an antechamber and led into the quarters of the abbot. He had a kind face, without a trace of gullibility. His desk was neatly organised, framed by heaving bookcases and shafts of greying light.

I was being examined, oblivious to the rules. "Why do you wish to join us?" – he enquired, then – "Follow me." We climbed down to the dormitories of the fresh initiates. He mutely pointed at the crooked berths, the metal chests, the hanging hair shirts. "We fast a lot. We pray from dawn till midnight."

He introduced me to the novices. "They look so happy and resilient" – I noted. He smiled. Echoes of clerical exertion from above rebounded in the cellar.

"We've got some guests" – he clarified, and suddenly awakening – "Have you already eaten?"

We crossed a lengthy passage veined with piping, thrusting agape the heavy oak doors at its end. I entered first, he followed, to face a purple multitude of churchmen. They rose in noiseless unison and waited.

My host declaimed:

"We have a Jewish guest, from Israel today" – he hesitated – "He will say grace for us. In Hebrew."

The hall reverberated. My host impelled me forward. A sea of crimson skullcaps as they rested foreheads on locked, diaphanous digits. I uttered the Jewish prayer slowly, improvising some. The alien phrases recoiled from the masonry, bounced among the massive trestle-tops, ricocheted from the clay utensils, the crude-carved cutlery, the cotton tablecloths. A towering Jesus bled into a candled recess.

The abbot led me to a chair and placed a bowl of nebulous soup in front. He stuck a wooden spoon right in the swirling liquid and went away. I ate, head bowed, maintaining silence, conforming to the crowd's ostentatious decorum. The repast over, I joined the abbot and his guests in the procession to his office. He recounted proudly the tale of my most imminent conversion.

They looked aghast. One of them enquired how I found Jesus. I said I hadn't yet. The abbot smiled contentedly. "He is not a liar" – he averred –

"He doesn't lie even when lying leads to profit." "Perhaps the profitable thing to do is to be truthful in this case" – one bitterly commented.

The train back to Geneva crisscrossed a radiant medley, deserted streets spanned by forlorn bridges, and spectral streetlamps. I exited into the ceilinged station, to the ascending roads and winding paths and broader avenues, on to my flat. Immersed in shadows to emerge in light, I gazed at curtained windows tightly shut. I window-shopped and kicked some gravel.

At the entrance to my building I didn't turn on the light. I couldn't face the immaculate stairwell, the doormats, the planted pots of crucible steel. But darkness meant a lethal fall or stepping in the wrong apartment, intruding on the astonished life of someone else (the keys were all identical, I suspected). I couldn't cope even with mine.

I turned around, into the public park, across the inner yard, down to the looping street that bordered on the water. The lake was silver struck and boats bobbed up and down abstracted waves. Moon, cleaved by stooping branches, hills vaporising into mist. I circumvented them, resting on soggy benches, the stations of my pilgrimage.

The lake and road diverged and I arrested at the slopes. I dithered momentarily and then proceeded to ascend the footpath, liberally dotted with fallen leaves and broken twigs. Submerged in muddy soil, the rich substrate of foliar death, I kicked the ripeness of dispersing acorns.

I stopped in front of Dudley's home – a medieval French chateau – to study yet again its contumacious contours. Inside, behind the gate, Dudley constructed a tiny summer house atop a brook. We oft debated topics there we both knew little of. I never came there unannounced or uninvited.

Moonlight transforms brickwork chateaux into the stuff of magic. They take your breath away and hurl it back at you until it splinters. A canine wail, how apt, as though directed. Ripples of wholeness, happy containment, perfect abundance.

I went back the way I came, booting the same pebbles, hard on my heels, ethereal presence. The night inflamed. I arrived at my apartment, the stacks of documents and books, a glass of opaque water, the stale exhaling carpet, talk shows unfolding in a thick Bavarian accent. I half expect an angry neighbour to tap his wall – our wall – with naked palms. Or, worse, the cleaning lady.

At home, it's almost dawn, a blue horizon. I slit a tidy envelope and draw its innards.

The abbot advises me to prepare to visit Boston in the following week. I am expected there for an in-depth interview. I made a good impression. "Your motives look sincere." In Christ.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[*For the Love of God \(Narcissism and Religion\)*](#)

[*Narcissists and Social Institutions*](#)

[*The Depressive Narcissist*](#)

[*Depression and the Narcissist*](#)

[*Deficient Narcissistic Supply*](#)

[*Facilitating Narcissism \(Narcissism and Social Skills\)*](#)

[*Telling Them Apart \(How to Recognize a Narcissist\)*](#)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

This part is meant only to provoke thoughts. It is not a substitute to independent thinking, criticism, and analysis.

The narcissist has an ambivalent relationship with God. He believes himself to be God-like: omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent. To him, God is a competitor as well as a source of supply. Can you spot this ambivalence in the story?

Religion as an anti-depressant. How many people you know turn to religion in order to assuage their feelings of emptiness and aimlessness? Can religion or God be sources of narcissistic supply?

The narcissist in the story seeks to exploit the Church and succeeds to deceive them into believing that he is sincere. In your experience, do narcissists often leave a good initial impression? Is it difficult to tell them apart? Are you disbelieved when you talk to people about "your" narcissist?

The narcissist in the story is depressed but not suicidal. What do you think is the connection between pathological narcissism and the tendency to commit suicide or entertain the idea of suicide (suicidal ideation)?

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The Last Days

By Sam Vaknin

For years now I have been urinating into flower pots, spraying the shiny leaves, the fissured russet soil.

Typically, as time passes, the plant I pee on blackens. It is an odd and ominous hue, a mesh of bronze and mustard arteries, like poisoning.

Still, it keeps on growing in degenerate defiance against me and its nature.

I often contemplate this toxic quirk of mine.

Does it amount to a behaviour pattern, a set of familiar, oft-repeated acts that verge on psychological automatism?

And if it does – is it peculiar? Who is to judge, by whose authority? What are the moral, or other, standards used to determine my eccentricity or idiosyncrasy?

I am not even sure the quirk is mine.

Admittedly, the urine thus expelled, a cloudy saffron, or a flaxen shade, emerges from the pallid, limp appendage to which I'm indisputably attached. But this, as far as I am concerned, does not transform my waste disposal into a pattern of behaviour, nor does it make this habitual discharge mine.

My observations of the routines of my evacuation onto horticultural containers are detached (I am almost tempted to label them "objective"). I ferret out the common denominators of all these incidents.

I never abuse a potted plant when given access to a restroom less than three minutes walk away. I judiciously use "three minutes". There have been cases of houseplant mutilation when the nearest WC was three minutes and ten seconds far.

Also I never purge myself merely for pleasure or convenience. I can conscientiously say that the opposite is true: I resort to my vegetables only in times of acute distress, beyond endurance. Undeniably, the physical release I feel entails emotional relief and the faint traces of the exudative orgasm one experiences with a whorish, feral woman, who is not one's spouse.

The longer I persevere, the fiercer the cascade, sculpting the loam to form lakes of mud and rustling froth.

Another matter that greatly occupies me is the in-depth perusal of the circumstances in which my preferences of elimination shift.

A prime condition, of course, is the availability of a planter. I find these in offices and other public places. I cherish the risk of being found excreting in these urns – the potential social condemnation, the forced commitment to a madhouse.

But why? What causes this fluidal exhibitionism?

The exposure of my member is important. The wafting chill upon my foreskin. It is primordially erotic, a relic of my childhood. We pee like that when we are toddlers: the organ bare, observed by all and sundry, the source of foaming falls.

It's an important point, this nippy air of infancy.

Equally, there is the delicious hazard of being spotted by a beautiful woman or by the authorities (a policeman, a warden, when I was in jail).

Yet, the wished for outcomes of this recklessness are by no means ascertained.

Consider the authorities.

This act is so in breach of my much-cultivated image as European intellectual – that I anticipate being thoroughly ignored, in an attempt to avoid the realisation that they've been cheated (or were they simply too obtuse to notice my blatant preference for herbal floods?)

Even more inauspicious:

They may be coerced into conceding that not everyone can safely be defined or subjected to immutable classification. This forced admission would undermine the pillars of their social order. It's better to pretend that they do believe my story – as I hurriedly button my open fly – that I was merely sorting out my clothes. They hasten to avert their eyes from the dark stain that encompasses my squirting manhood.

A beautiful woman is another matter altogether.

If she happens to detect me, it has the makings of pornography. Being the right type, this can be the beginning of a great, blue passion.

I am not sure what is the legal status of my actions. Unobserved, in the absence of a gasping public – my exposure is not indecent. So what is it? An obscenity? Damage to public property? A corruption of the morals? Is there an offence in the codex thus described: "Exposing one's penis to the breeze while standing over a black and brown and yellow plant?"

I bet there isn't – though one can never be too sure. We are, therefore, left with the phenomenology of my exploits. Put less genteelly: we can describe the act but are very far from comprehending it.

I also notice that I resort to flowerpots before I browse a book, or while I do it, or after. I use my lower culvert to expunge my upper sewer of all manner of read cerebral effluence.

My learned piss, my highbrow vinegar.

While immersed in reading, sometimes I forget to drink for many hours. It does not affect the frequency of my eliminations. I, therefore, feel compelled to establish no connection between fluids consumed and urine produced when intellectually engaged. My higher functions offer splendid regulation of my aqueous economy.

My manner of urinating in plant containers is different to the way I pee in the gleaming bowls of regular loos. Confined among the tiles, I discharge meticulously, in a thin and measured trickle, free to ruminate on theoretical matters or to consider the last woman to have abandoned me and why she has.

I judge her reasons flimsy.

Out in nature – as reified by shrivelling potted shrubs – I experience a breakdown in communication with my wand. I find myself cajoling it both verbally and by straining the muscles of my bladder and my lower abdomen. I wag it with a mildness that masks suppressed hostility and pent aggression. I begrudge it the spontaneity and variegation of its inner and outer lives.

Following a period of obsequious supplication, it acquiesces and emancipates my floral urine: a stern and furious jet erupts in all directions, a sprinkler out of control, a hose without a nozzle.

There is the loneliness, of course.

Opposing a flourishing jardinière, or an ivy covered fire hydrant – I am alone, the kind of privacy that comes with windswept nudity and public intimate acts. This is the solitude of a rebel about to be caught, an act of utter self-destruction as meaningful as farting or ejaculating in a whore who's bored to the point of distraction. In short: the angst.

I pee in existential window boxes.

Regarding the pots themselves – I am indifferent.

I am pretty certain that I expel not on the containers but on the life that they contain. I urinate on growth itself and not on the confines of its development. I am capable of peeing on houseplants wherever they may be. I did it in elevators and on standpipes, around hedges, and in our pristine rooms – my former wife's and mine.

Long ago, I passed urine in an empty classroom in my school where they wasted mornings grooming dim-witted girls to be ineffectual secretaries. That was my first exposure and aberrant liquefaction. I used a desiccated little pot. Truth be told, I was not to blame. The janitor locked me in without allowing for my incontinent bladder, the consequence of chronic prostatitis from early adolescence.

Thus incarcerated among the minacious rows of electric typewriters, I did what I had to do on the turf of the schoolroom's only flowerpot. I spent two blissful months of cooped up afternoons there, typing my finals thesis about the last days of Adolf Hitler.

As my book-length paper progressed, the classroom reeked of stale excretions. The plant first shrivelled, changing its colour from dusty khaki to limpid yellow and then to screaming orange. It was only a short way from there to the familiar brown-spotted murk that accompanied the grounded shrub's desperate contortions, attempting to evade the daily acidic chastisement I meted out.

At last, it twisted around itself, in a herbal agonising whirl, and froze. It became a stump, a remnant, the arid memory of an erstwhile plant. It formed a tiny cavity that whistled with the breeze. It assumed the air of parchment, increasingly translucent as I further drenched it.

It was the first time I witnessed the intricacies of death in action. Being at hand, I was its main or only agent, the first and sole determinant of its triumph over life. I meticulously documented each convolution of the inferior organism. I realised that few can reliably recount the withering of a plant in such conditions. Its wilting is bound to elude the finest of detectives if he refuses to acknowledge my sodden contribution.

This was, indeed, the point: an opportunity to murder, replete with the attendant pleasures of a protracted torturing to death – and still to be absolved.

Are you upset?

Then ask yourselves: what shocks you in the passing of a flower in a classroom thirty years ago?

You have no ready answer.

Lately, I adopted this novel habit of peeing in foreign toilets, around the bowls, creating fizzing ponds on shimmering floors. I half expect the tiles to yellow and to bronze and then to rarefy into limpidity. But porcelain is more resilient than certain forms of life. It keenly feeds on urine. It's not the way to go. Must find another venue to explore that wet frisson.

I exit lavatories engrossed in mourning, dejected, nostalgia-inundated.

I heave myself onto a leathery love seat and crumble, am embryo ensconced. I must completely reconsider I know not what, till when, what purpose to this contemplation. At least the rabid dousing of flower pots is meaningful – I pee, therefore I kill.

But this incomprehensible trot from john to armchair and back appears to be the wrong trajectory. On the other hand, I found no other path and an internal voice keeps warning me to delve no deeper.

I gather that my wife has left a while back. She used to wonder why the plants in our apartment expire soon and many. She changed the fading vegetation, never the dying earth. Not having heard her questions (and the plants being untouched), I conclude, with a fair amount of certainty, that she is gone.

No point in peeing into pots whose plants are dead. My wife would have enjoyed the metaphor. She says that what you see with me is never what

you get. I find it difficult to imagine what she would have said had she known about my disposal habits. It would have fit her theory about me, for sure.

At any rate, I am not inclined to water urns whose flowers withered. Unholy urine, such as mine, is most unlikely to effect a resurrection.

I religiously wash my hands after the act. This might be considered out of character as I owned up to peeing whichever way, on plants and other objects. Sometimes the wind messes up the stream and sprays me teasingly. I cannot always shower and scouring my palms is kind of a ritual: "see you, after all, I am purged."

I miss my wife, the malleable folds of creamy skin I used to nibble.

Now there is no one I can peck and the flat is constantly in dusk. I am unable – really, unwilling – to get off the lounge I dragged to the entrance of the toilet. I wish I had someone I could gnaw at. Coming to think of it, my wife would have been interested in the details of my soggy deviance. But I am pretty certain that she would have been the only one. And, even so, her curiosity would have been mild at best. Or non-existent, now that she has vanished.

I cleanse my hands again. It's safer. One never knows the mischief of the winds. Why should I risk the inadvertent introduction of my waste into my mouth while eating?

When my wife informed me she is bailing out of our depressing life, she insisted that I was the first to abandon her. She accused me of emotional absenteeism. I was in the throes of a particularly gratifying leak on the undergrowth around a crimson fireplug. The oxblood soil, now frothy laced, aflame, the setting sun.

I placed the call to her naively. She bid farewell, her voice was steel, and she was gone.

I instantly grasped the stark futility of any war I'd wage to bring her back. I also knew it'll never be the same, peeing on plants. I am bound to remember her and what and how she said, the frightful burn, that swoon. I must have turned yellow-pale, then brown-orange, and putrefactive arteries have sprung throughout me. I couldn't do a thing but writhe under her sentence.

The muffled sounds of cars from outside. Some people tell me make by distant rumbles: deep bass, stentorian busses, the wheezing buzz of compacts. I play this guessing game no longer. I understand now that the phone won't ring, that the house is empty, that there is nothing to revive a shrivelled shrub, immersed in urine, implanted in ammoniac soil.

I think about the last days of Hitler: how he roamed his underground bunker with imagined ulcers, poisoning his beloved canines, his birthday party, and how he wed his mistress the day before the twain committed suicide.

How they were both consumed by fire.

This was the topic of my dissertation when I urinated for the first time in a flowerpot, in my childhood high school, in my forlorn birth town, so long ago. I had no choice. The school's caretaker locked me in.

And this is what I wrote:

How two get married knowing they will soon be dead and how it matters not to them. They exterminate the dogs and chew on cyanide, having instructed everyone beforehand regarding the disposal of their bodies. And then the shot.

Their last few days I studied in those early days of mine. Their last few days.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[*Deficient Narcissistic Supply*](#)

[*The Delusional Way Out*](#)

[*Narcissism, Psychosis, and Delusions*](#)

[*The Intermittent Explosive Narcissist*](#)

[*The Depressive Narcissist*](#)

[*Depression and the Narcissist*](#)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

This part is meant only to provoke thoughts. It is not a substitute to independent thinking, criticism, and analysis.

The narrator in the story is clearly disintegrating. But what tells us that he is a narcissist?

Do you think - from your experience - that delusions and psychotic breaks are an integral part of narcissism, especially when narcissistic supply is running low?

Do you find that narcissists change in the wake of life crises such as the one experienced by the narrator?

Does the narrator love his wife - or is the nature of his attachment to her different to love? If it is not love - what is it?

The narrator mentions Hitler. Is it a natural association for narcissists who are bound to admire power and notoriety?

The act of urination (which does take place in reality) is also symbolic. What do you think it symbolizes?

[Return](#)

The Future of Madeleine

By Sam Vaknin

Read the [*Hebrew original*](#).

Madeleine lodged us in a tiny cubicle at the end of a corridor. Her establishment is all tidy and neat, but miniature. Madeleine's doll house, this hotel. At dawn, she rises and fixes a basic breakfast in the ground floor kitchenette. Scents of bacon and fried eggs waft through the building and shifts change at the reception desk, the weary loudly welcoming their alert replacements.

Madeleine takes note with gravity of the report submitted by the outgoing crew and updates the incomers with its details. Her make-up always fresh, her hair fluffy, her attire impeccable and stainless. Her sexuality harnessed by a prim-looking business suit, her lipstick an insinuated crimson.

Eli blinks at the sun and shields his eyes under a sinewy arm, flanked by two thick and raven eyebrows.

"They should pass a law" – he argues to no one in particular – "People ought to work by night and sleep throughout the day. Let the nocturnal be diurnal and vice versa."

The same sentence every tortured awakening. His ostentatious misery provokes contagious mirth in both of us. We go hysterical among the crumpled sheets, beating the shrunken pillows with our fists (his outsize mine). At long last, Eli gets up and goes to shave and shower in the nude.

I am not embarrassed. Straddling the minuscule bath tub, I mutter:

"We are penniless."

"Yes, I am aware of it" – sighs Eli and whips the sink with lathered razor. He uses his fleshy backhand to wipe the frothy mirror. Pressing his nostrils upwards, ham-handed, he shaves the cobalt patches of his nascent beard and whiskers.

"I got myself a sucker for a backgammon match. He is from Iran. Was a Minister of labour or agriculture or something like that..." – he hisses a curse and cleanses a pearl of blood from prominent chin.

"What else?" – I enquire offhandedly. I know Eli well. He is too calm.

"Listen" – he enthuses as though the idea just budded in his mind – "there is this Jewish cardiologist, filthy rich, Marc. He lives all by himself in a six-room apartment in the sixteenth arrondissement. I introduced him to this chick and now they are getting hitched."

I keep my peace, awaiting the dénouement. Eli eyes me slyly:

"I told him you are a genius and that we are planning a convention of Sephardim in Israel, sponsored by Itzhak Navon, the former president. It set him on fire."

I cross my legs and inspect closely a bloodied mole embedded in my thigh.

"What have you got there?" – enquires Eli – "Anyhow, this guy is loaded, I am telling you. We can easily fleece him for five grand or more for the consultancy we are planning on opening here, in Paris. Add to this my cousin's money and the dough from the dentist and that computer guy – and we are in business."

"If it survives your gambling" – I interject tranquilly.

"You are such a doomsayer!" – Eli fumes, banging the bathroom door behind him.

A minute later, smirking – "Remember the wife of the Sorbonne professor at yesterday's dinner?" – I nod – "She called me this morning. She wants to interview me for a WIZO newsletter, or some such. I told her the only way to quiz me is on my bed, in my hotel room. She laughed and said that this is how she conducts all her assignments anyhow" – marvels Eli – "So, take a walk, knock back some coffee, munch on a croissant or something."

There is a cramped restaurant on the intersection, up the street, opposite the Military Academy. Every afternoon, for months now, I eat my duck in garlic there. Sometimes, Eli and I adopt this mock Swedish accent and demand the most improbable of dishes, barely able to contain our hilarity. The tortured waiters shun us.

Now, waiting for a table to clear, I bury my head in giant mug of greasy coffee replete with floating isles of pastry. Then back to the hotel in a deliberate slow motion.

Eli is sitting on a chair, bare feet on window ledge. The bed a muddle of ejaculated sheets. He casts a sluggish glance in my direction, upheaves, and dresses perfunctorily.

"I fixed with Marc. He is waiting for us. Don't start with petulant expressions and your usual brattiness. Be nice, we can no longer afford even our morning coffee."

A scarface Vietnamese with a tintinnabulary dialect minds the reception desk in the deserted lobby. Eli looks disappointed but mumbles "morning". We stroll towards the nearest metro station down the street.

Marc's spacious abode is in a newly renovated building. Bareness reverberates through six high-ceilinged rooms. The hulking cardiologist lives in the kitchen. He butchers meditatively a silver herring wrapped in a slab of putrid cheese laid on an ageing slice of bread. He licks lubricious swollen fingers, extending them for handshake, and smacks his fleshy lips.

"Sit down, please" – he utters cordially – "You're welcome!" His Hebrew, guttural and broken. Though somewhat stooping, Marc has the countenance of a Belmondo. Eli attacks the remnants of the kipper, stuffing his face with staling crumbs. "Where's Mazal?" – he enquires, between the mouthfuls, dodging digested scraps.

Masticating, Marc responds:

"She suddenly took off. She said she couldn't stand it here."

There follows a duet of smarmy nibbles, the unctuous morsels of a feigned alliance and selfish solidarity, the smutty autopsy of smoke-dried, gutted love.

Eli assures him: "I will get her back to you" – and Marc embarks on careful planning, strategy and tactics of the reconquista – when Mazal steps indoors. A vague air of long lost familiarity, a memorable face – the curving forehead, dark ponds for eyes, a boxer's nose.

"Marc" – she exclaims.

Sheathed in a hail of breadcrumbs and disintegrating cheese, the ursine pilgrim approaches her: "Mazal!"

They do not touch each other, not even the customary kiss on cheek. Mazal says: "I am going to put my things in the bedroom" – and smiles at me.

Eli coughs politely:

"Marc, we will leave you, guys, alone. Be a man, won't you? Show your love, woo her, be romantic. A woman is not a cow, to mount, to screw, and then to turn your back on and go to sleep. A woman needs attention, flowers, a restaurant and orchestra on her birthday, buy her a fresh dress here and there. Plunge your hand in your pocket. Be stingy and die lonely!"

Marc assents despondently, his eyes riveted to Mazal's swaying buttocks.

"Marc" – implores Eli – "let's finish this business with the money. To establish the firm, I must deposit it in the bank this afternoon."

Marc casts a haunted, ensnared glance at Eli's general direction.

But Eli strikes relentless:

"Marc, she'll be out of the room any minute now. If we keep arguing over these stinking five thousand dollars, you will lose her forever. Either you're in or you're out. The time to decide is here and now."

"I'm in, I'm in" – stammers Marc, defeated. He noisily doddles to the adjacent room. Eli winks at me expectantly. Marc returns with a bulky wad of cash and a stained, much folded, piece of rubricated paper.

"Sign this, both you" – he growls and, mournfully, to himself: "fifty thousand francs."

"A mere five thousand dollars" – Eli corrects him – "and the money doubles each half a year or so. Welcome, partner!"

Marc reciprocates with a feeble handshake and crumbles onto a kitchen stool. The flickering neon light weighs on his luxuriant eyelids, skirting the shady folds under his sockets. Eli bows and whispers hoarsely in our sponsor's hirsute ear: "Go to her, Marc. She is waiting for you. She is a woman."

Marc gestures half-heartedly but doesn't budge. Eli shrugs disparagingly and signals me to follow him.

Back in the street, he gleefully observes:

"She'll never stay with him."

We promenade in silence and then:

"It's five thousand US dollars we made today! We earned ourselves a normal lunch for a change. I haven't eaten properly since all those bets."

Eli used to wager meals in fine eateries on the outcomes of a quiz. The terms were thus: the dupe he lured could ask me ten questions which I correctly answered. I, in my turn, would then perplex the prey with a single, insoluble, challenge. I never lost. But when I won from Eli his platinum tie clip and pair of cufflinks, the betting stopped.

A tangled web of avenues and squares, the foliated daubs of green and orange, the ash-clad buildings eerily aglow. Swirling bouquets of men in women, hormone-exuding teens, whores and their clients are negotiating seed. Paris perspires lust under the seething sun.

The corner drugstore is congested. Eli devours the headlines of a week-old Israeli paper. He doesn't even notice Mayer who occupies a seat beside him. His lips give shape to writhing syllables. Mayer regards his efforts with nauseated fascination.

"Eli" – I exclaim – "Look who is here! If it isn't Mayer!"

"Mayer!" – Eli wrinkles the daily – "What are you doing here? When did you arrive? Care for a little backgammon match?"

Mayer sneers, his bellows chest pulsating. With effeminate hand, he smears the effluence of the mall's tropic micro-climate on his balding head.

"You are still the same, you piece of shit" – he roars and they embrace affectionately.

Eli and Mayer are always in the throes of some conspiracy and I stay in the room, deterred by the metropolitan expanse, leafing through an illustrated French encyclopaedia. Madeleine intrudes infrequently, ostensibly to enquire of my needs, but really to find out if Eli had returned.

I pity her. I say:

"Eli met a friend of his from Israel. His name is Mayer."

She snorts bitterly and hangs up on my compassion.

Eli and Mayer stagger into the hotel at night, with fur-packed beauties hanging on their arms. Up, in the room, Eli points a stubby finger and enquires: "How much to do this guy?" – they gauge me unappreciatively and mumble something. Eli and Mayer burst into convulsive merriment.

Eli continues, exhaling heavily: "And that includes his dog?"

The girls recoil, torrentially blaspheming, and fling their imitation leather purses at the now much-bolted door.

Their voices fade along the corridor and up the creaking stairs.

I am left alone, in thought, pierced by their assaying gaze, when Eli breaks into the room, stark-naked, and drags me to the floor above.

"Come, come!" – he hastens me – "You mustn't miss this! Two stunners making it. This is something you have never seen before, I bet!"

"I don't want to!" – I whisper, prying my shoulder loose from his clammy vise – "Leave me alone!" – and I retreat, scuttling, to the safety of the landing.

"You are a nutcase, that's what you are!" – Eli now pelts me from his elevated perch – "Even a homosexual would be excited! Such knockouts, a ton of breasts, exquisite asses, that's what you are missing, you hear me?"

By morning his wrath subsides. Casting a waxy arm over his fluttering eyes, he blocks the fervid light and croaks:

"They should pass a law."

"Where's Mayer?" – I enquire.

"Up in the room" – he giggles – "Stuck with the whores. They claim to have been nurses in a hospital. When he revives, he will have to pay them" – he finds it side-splitting.

"Madeleine was looking for you" – I informed him and added – "Many times." I evaded his scolding stare, turning the pages in my book in the wrong direction.

"What did you tell her?" – he rasps.

"Nothing whatsoever."

"And she?"

"Said none."

"We will visit her this evening" – Eli decrees and drops the subject altogether.

A few minutes later:

"Stay here" – he exits and locks the door behind him.

I contemplate the wooden planks that stand between me and the hallway and ruffle the pages of my book. When I rise to fill my cup with water from the corner sink, the walls reverberate with Mayer's blows.

"Where is the son of a bitch?" – he bawls – "Wait till I lay my hands on him!"

"He is not here. He descended earlier." Mayer digest the information and then attacks the doorknob viciously. "Is he inside? He locked you in?" – suspicion-impregnated pause – "Open the door! You won't?"

"He locked me in, he's gone, I have no key, I cannot open up" – and Mayer curses audibly. He is suddenly besieged by agitated female voices and tries to weave his tattered French into a sentence. The sounds recede

as, having yielded, he climbs to the cubicle, apparently to recompense them.

By now the hotel is virtually deserted of its guests and of their echoes. Time is marked by the cheerful banter of the staff, some heated arguments, the weary vacuuming of carpets, the squeaky linen trolley. The equanimity of the eternal. Bathed in anaemic light, I watch my legs and arm, propped on a thickset book, with growing alienation. When Eli unlocks the door, he, too, does not belong. Not an invader but an error, the wrong protagonist of an unfinished novel.

Failing to pierce the dusk, he blinks his way towards the light switch and beats it into brightness. He eyes me intensely, his rare but most inspiring insect. "Get dressed. We need to be at Madeleine's in half an hour." A feline leap into the bathroom and Eli, urinates, legs wide apart, the door ajar, letting out the hissing voice and pungent smell of fizzing pee.

Still steeped in unreality, I kneel. From battered suitcase, tucked under the bed, I extract a rumpled blazer, age-patinated pants. "Put on cravat!" – he snaps – "She is not a floozy, has a lot of style" – he sounds proud. I don a necktie.

"Now listen up" – Eli expounds – "I told her about you, she thinks you are a demigod. She is convinced that you can tell the future. A few things about her: she is widowed, rich, and lonely. She has a Turkish paramour, a yachtsman. He works the Paris line and ends here once a month."

"What does he look like?" – I probe and Eli, violently revolted, unfurls my tie knot and motions me to start anew.

"Tall, swarthy, beefy, moustache. She is addicted to me. She wants me to move over to her place."

"I realise that" – I retort, irritably – "I am not blind, you know."

The taxi crawls into a murky parking lot and Eli and I sneak towards the glass paned entrance and press the intercom. Madeleine buzzes us in immediately, no questions asked. Silhouetted against the backlit doorframe, extended arm on jamb, she is carved into her wavy gown. Eli pecks her turned cheek and brushes against her nipples. I do not.

She doesn't even wait for us to settle down, thrusting her palm forward, digits outspread, under my flushing face. Her robe unravels some, hinting at ample, creamy breasts.

"Give me a reading" – she commands me hoarsely. I notice now her layered makeup, the sweat ravines and mascara pools, shaven abrasions where chin meets neck.

I contemplate her tiny hand, curvaceous, and say:

"I see a man."

"Who is he?" – she prods with bated breath – "How does he look and what is our future?"

"A towering man of dark complexion..." – a built-in hesitation, the vision blurring, Eli and I have practiced this on many women, a tiresome routine. I close my eyes, waggle my head, clasp knees in helplessness, writhe for a while, exhale:

"He wears a fine moustache. I see great waters..."

She yelps in fear and joy.

"You are two lovers... A boat, he is on it ... and the sea..."

Eli suppresses yawns, but Madeleine vaults into her bedroom, barefooted thumps on tiled floor. These fleshy thuds arouse. She reappears and kneels beside me, scattering purplish Polaroids on a nearby coffee table.

"That's him" – she pinkie-indicates a snapshot – "In Turkey, Istanbul..."

Her scent is primal, her neck too short but sculpted, she moistens lips with lithe, inviting tongue.

Eli boasts of me: "You see, what did I tell you? There's nothing he don't know, he see it all, a genius, he is the talk of every town in Israel..."

"You must have told him in advance" – Madeleine pouts and lays a shapely arm on Eli's thigh. Hair sprouts shaggy in her cavernous armpit.

"I swear to you I haven't!" – Eli withdraws, offended.

"Your father took you when you were a child" – I startle both, reading the headlines of an inner bulletin unfolding – "You conceived his child and then aborted. I hear the baby whimpering."

For one delirious moment, they both appraise me, shocked, albeit for different reasons.

"What did you say?" – Eli recovers first but Madeleine shrieks, reduced to a blubbing heap of mouth and shoulders. The muted violence of buried words tears at her body. She rends the carpet and vainly reconstructs it. Still sobbing mutely, Eli consoles her impotently, casting condemning glances my way as though exclaiming "Look what you have done!"

Madeleine is quieter now but welled-up ripples traverse her crouching figure.

She whispers something and Eli puts an ear to quavering lips. Another hiss and Eli lays an incidental hand on Madeleine's heaving chest and counter-whispers. A lengthy verbal intercourse ensues. She nods assent and Eli jumps, enthused.

"Join me today to see something you haven't seen in your entire life!"

With Eli this could only mean sex but something in his voice forbids me to refuse, an ominous promise, a kind of incest. Madeleine strolls dreamily into her bedroom and emerges moulded into a mustard toga and silver stiletto heels. Under the flowing robe, she is ensconced in nylon tights and a bikini top.

We drive through fluoresced, abandoned boulevards, awash with rustling leaves. A car or two speeds by, the metro stations gargle. Madeleine's

numb face is ravaged by the intermittence of the lights. Her lifeless hands clutch at the steering wheel and hardly turn it left or right.

"It's here" – says Eli.

We descend few stairs to face a peeping hole embedded in a metal door which Eli raps. A mushroomed eye appears, withdraws, the gate is opened by a decaying woman, a brownish cigarette holder dangling from scarlet orifice. She motions us in with remnant grace.

We deposit overcoats and bags in a tucked-in wardrobe and negotiate a red-lit passageway into a bar. It's crowded. The patrons, slumped in upholstered armchairs and facing round glass-tops, are catered to by bow-tied waiters. These take their orders, serve them, replace the over spilling ashtrays, collect the checks, and smile profusely at the favoured clients.

Eli shoves me towards a giant curtain.

"Cent-six" – he sounds awed – "One hundred and six. This is the address and the name of this establishment. The bar is merely cover. You could call it a hundred and five" – he tsks and snickers gruffly, his hand engirdling Madeleine's waist. Her eyes are distant now, her hair atypically dishevelled. Skimpy clothes askew, her chalky body flares into the haze.

Eli rams his tailor's dummy toward the draped partition. He lets her pass and follows. I join them in a musky, clouded room. The light is dim, the cubicle immersed in droning chatter. Eli directs attention to the furthest corner: "She comes here every day. She must consume a bucketful of sperm."

A woman's head is bobbing in a virile loin, with one hand she is kneading his erupting masculinity, the other rubs another's member. Right next to them, a female self-impales on hoary groin. Eli drives Madeleine to the centre, disrobes and strips her of her vestments with rapid sleight of hand.

She stands there, nude voluptuousness, uneasy feet and fisted palms, her eyes occluded. She breathes tortuously. Eli fondles her breasts and passes a lustful hand between her legs. Others approach and taste her hesitatingly. Five minutes later, she vanishes under a pack of males, tree branch obscured by bee hives. Only her toes are visible, bouncing, contracting, flexed and still, fanned and convergent. Men rise, wiping off semen and others take their steamy place. Men on her breasts, men on her limbs, men in her orifices.

A tall, dark woman invites me to a party. I decline, she shrugs and proposes to another. I fall asleep.

Eli stirs me awake.

"Let's go home" – he croaks. He rubs a pair of bloodshot eyes between two fingers.

"Where is Madeleine?" – I cover my mouth to arrest the morning odours.

"She is gone" – says Eli, ireful – "She went home and so should we. Come on."

It is a lengthy, silent stride to our hotel. Eli stops by the reception desk, as though awaiting someone.

Back in the room, he asks:

"How did you know about her father? He really mounted her when she was young."

"I didn't know. It sometimes happens. I can't control it."

Eli regards me sceptically and plunges to the bed, fully-attired. He rests his head on interlocking hands and canvasses the slanted ceiling. Then he turns on his side and begs:

"Please read my palm."

"Stop it, Eli. I am exhausted. It's been a long day. Anyhow I am bluffing, it's a charade, a con, a trick. You of all people should know that."

"Please divine my future" – Eli pleads, alarmed – "I have a feeling something real bad is going to happen soon."

I hold his massive palm in mine and study the sooty definite creeks that cross and intersect.

"You are losing your wife these very days" – I pronounce, almost inaudibly – "You are in Paris and she is no longer yours back home."

"What did you say, speak up, I am telling you!" – Eli panics.

"You are losing Zehava, OK? Now will you let me be?" – I shrill and keep grumbling – "You have already lost her, she is no longer yours", until I drop off.

I wake into the cadaverous silence of an early afternoon. Madeleine is on the phone:

"Samuel" – her voice is as imperious and decisive as ever – "Eli departed in the morning. Went back to Israel. Some kind of family emergency, he said."

I wait.

"I ask you to leave this hotel" – she carries on – "You owe me nothing, you don't have to pay. I will settle the accounts with Eli when he is back. I simply want you out of here this instant."

Sleep-drunk, exuding tar and alcohol, I petition her:

"Where will I go?"

"There's a small inn on the Left Bank. I reserved a room for you, it's cheap."

She hangs up on me.

I am in the midst of hurried packing when Eli calls:

"Shmuel" – his voice is crackling static, dim, and foreign – "Zehava has someone. She wants a divorce and to take the kids. I feel like a boatman who has lost his oars, the bitch. I go to Paris to make a living, to create a business for our future, and she whores around..."

I gently place the sizzling receiver on the bed and drag my book-laden suitcase to the corridor and then, thunderously, down the spiral staircase.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[*Narcissists and Women*](#)

[*Narcissists, Sex and Fidelity*](#)

[*My Woman and I*](#)

[*That Thing Between a \(Narcissistic\) Man and a Woman*](#)

[*The Extramarital Narcissist*](#)

[*Dr. Jackal and Mr. Hide*](#)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

This part is meant only to provoke thoughts. It is not a substitute to independent thinking, criticism, and analysis.

Is Eli's attitude towards women typical of narcissists?

What is the difference between narcissists and psychopaths? Some of the behaviors described in the story are more typical of the latter.

What is the role of sex in Eli's relationship with Madeleine?

Is narrator (Sam) more self-aware than Eli? If yes, does it make him guiltier?

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The Out Kid

by Sam Vaknin

Sima was six years old when she died. Mother turned off the television and instructed me to go to my grandma's home at once. It was that time of day between retiring sunlight and emerging gloom. My grandmother was sobbing silently, seated gingerly on a shabby couch, her face buried in an oversized and crumpled handkerchief. My grandpa, muted, just hugged her close. It all reminded me of a Passover Eve, refreshments strewn on tables, hastily appended by my uncles and covered with flowery rags.

All lights were on, tarring the wiry tree in the garden with juddering shadows. I sat in the corner, thinking about Sima, wondering if her beauty survived her death. They said she had leukemia and vomited blood incessantly. She died, awash with it, her pallid face depressed against my grandpa's shoulder. I pondered if it was right to go on loving her. I thought about Uzi, her brother and my cousin.

After the funeral, Uzi was sent to a Kibbutz, never to return, leaving behind unfinished cowboy-and-Indian games on my grandmother's verandah. There were so many things I had to tell him but he was gone.

A few months later, my aunt invited me to join her to visit the Kibbutz. In her youth, she was a green-eyed, lithe beauty – cascading, raven hair and my mother's cheekbones, but gentler. She divorced still young and then Sima died on her and she found employment in Haifa, in a hospice for the terminally ill.

She was a recluse, living in a tiny, viewless flat which she compulsively scoured and polished. She spared her words and I was deterred by these and other eccentricities. But I wanted to see Uzi again and talk to him, as we used to. I imagined his full-cheeked laughter and the sparkle in his eyes, under his curls.

So, I said I'll come along and found myself, one summer morning, accompanying my aunt to the Kibbutz, a winding, dusty way. We switched countless buses and sipped orange juice through straws and my aunt tilted her wide-brimmed hat to expose a lock of greying hair. Her eyes were moist. She said: "I am going to see my Uzi now. It's been so long." The sun invaded her fedora, imprisoning her quavering lips behind a beaming grid.

I wanted to enquire why did she send Uzi to the Kibbutz to start with and tell her how I missed his smile, our games, the bucket loads of water

he would pour on me after we bathed in the nearby sea. But I refrained because her eyes went metal when she mentioned him. She never even mentioned Sima.

So, there we were, standing at the gate, she and I and our gear, all packed in fading plastic bags at our feet, enshrouded by the black vapour of the shimmering asphalt and the roaring and receding bus. My aunt, contemplating the waning transport, grabbed my sweaty palm and lifted the rustling shopping bags. A whiskered driver of a tractor regarded us with curiosity, then guided us to our destination.

My aunt clenched a childish fist to tap the door, but left it hanging in mid-air awhile. Then, she let it drop, an alien appendage. She removed her hat, clinging to it awkwardly, straightened the wrinkles in her dress and gazed at her flat patent shoes uncomfortably. She knocked on the outer screen rigidly and the sounds reverberated in the house like distant thunder.

The door was opened so instantly that we recoiled. My aunt stared at the middle-aged woman and returned her barely audible "hello". It was as though her body shrank. She undulated with her baggage eagerly. The older woman's lips were smiling at my aunt, but her eyes remained on guard.

She told me to look for Uzi in the animal corner, close to the mountain, among the cowsheds and cages. She needs to talk to my aunt in private, she ventured unnecessarily.

She softly shut the door behind me and I stood, dazed by the scorching sun. Barefoot and well-tanned kids, clad in shorts and T-shirts, surrounded and studied me and I reciprocated. I froze and they did not get closer. We formed two groups and measured one another.

A bird-like girl broke the spell: "Are you a new Out Kid?"

I didn't know what was an Out Kid. I told her that I was Uzi's cousin and that I am searching for him.

She gave a toothy smile, crossed the invisible barrier and held my trembling hand: "Let's go". She examined me, astounded, when I withdrew and violently extracted myself from her grasp.

We silently traversed some green-hedged paths. Brown signs with massive yellow lettering were everywhere. She navigated deftly among the gravel and the fences until we reached a bank of crates, laid on the sun-parched ground and hosting rabbits. Their wheezy, ribbed breathing nearly unstitched their fur.

Uzi was standing there, his back to us. He leaned his head on an extended arm, supported by the cage's frame, perusing a frightened rodent, whose nostrils twitched with desperation.

I called out: Uzi! He turned around listlessly and looked at me, as though unsure of my identity. My guide hopped from one dainty foot to another,

her discomfiture increasing. Finally she departed and joined the growing bunch of children that monitored us from afar.

"It is a porcupine" – said Uzi, his eyes averted. "I tend to it and to the entire animal corner. We have sheep and horses, too" – he hugged the circumference with a bronzed gesticulation. "I climb the mountain daily with my father" – he added. I kept silent. His real father deserted him when he was toddler.

Uzi grew quiet, too. He kicked a pile of dry manure and asked me if I want to see the cows and I said I did and off we went. It was like in the olden days, when he and Sima and myself strolled down the white-hot pavements. She had an auburn mane she locked into a ponytail, her mother's eyes, green tarns, a swan's own neck. She made us laugh at the unexpected femininity of her most childish enquiries.

Then and there, with Uzi by my side, it was as nothing happened, a midsummer's nightmare, when you wake, perspiring, but in a familiar bed.

We talked profusely and laughed and I inevitably dived into some straw-infested fertilizer and didn't mind at all because Uzi was with me to pour large bucketfuls of glacial water he carried from a nearby stream. I closed my eyes and pretended to be at sea, to have brought along the spraying waves and the caressing breeze, a gift to Uzi, and a reminder.

The native kids just followed us, their eyes azure, their skins a seamless copper. They tracked our movements with naked, strapping bodies and clean-smelling hair. They clung to us and giggled secretly and pointed at Uzi and whispered in each other's elfin ears, and then they chuckled.

Uzi said not a word. He passed a soothing hand on a horse's muzzle and a cow's leg and the pulsating furs of bunnies. He gently pulled their elongated ears and they scurried to and fro and made him laugh. He had a gurgling, erupting laughter, Uzi had.

We climbed a thorny, stone-filled road atop a hill, pausing to look at the vanishing Kibbutz at our feet. "There's my home" – Uzi singled out a cubicle. I wasn't sure which one he meant, but I did not insist. I only looked at the hazy greenery and at the gleaming swimming pool and said: "Let's go down, I am worn out."

The children awaited our descent and cried at Uzi, who ignored them. He only hastened his steps and so did I. They followed us. Surrounded, stranded on a tiny path, we stopped. They shoved Uzi and pulled.

"Who is he?" – they demanded – "Why did he come here? Where is he from?"

He frowned and said: "It's no one special. He just came with my mother from over there" – with a vague gesture to indicate the nowhere.

The girl fixed me with her gaze.

"It's nothing, it's no one! He is only here for a visit, I am telling you!" – Uzi pleaded.

"He must return where he came from" – said one of them, his eye a cold blue sparkle. His jaws rippled as he spoke, skin smooth and dry. My shirt was dabbed in sweat and hung, keeled over, from my thick, long trousers. "Let him go back" – echoed the girl – "We cannot have another one of you. Isn't it enough that you gorge on our food and have new parents?"

Uzi was soundless, his head lowered. I couldn't look into his eyes like we used to do when we were sad. Sima and I had this game of who would be the first to stare down the other with an invincible, metallic look. Deep inside, I thought, this must be how Uzi sees them – as enemies to be stared down and out and away.

One kid approached and tugged him at the shoulder and Uzi stooped. It was as if a valve was drawn, the air let out, to render a misshapen Uzi. Another child stepped forcefully on Uzi's earth-baked, sweat-furrowed toes. His breath mingled with his quarry's as he increased the pressure. Uzi's face contorted but he didn't budge.

Jaded and starved they left and we proceeded to Uzi's new abode, amidst the well-trimmed lawns and neck-high hedges. He knocked hesitantly and someone let us in. Uzi erupted in bitter sobbing, beating his sides with pale-clenched fists. He stood there, squealing and grunting, like the animals in his corner and the muffled sounds filled the house and washed over the bowl of fruits and the heavy, murky curtains, and the antique wooden furniture, rebounding, a thousand echoes.

My aunt called his name. His new parents entered the kitchenette and sealed the sliding door. I had nowhere else to be. "I brought you some food" – said the mother and he nodded bravely and brushed aside the tears that threatened to emerge. She opened the overflowing plastic bags with learned helplessness, displaying pastries she prepared at home.

But Uzi selected a mid-size orange and peeled it expertly, stuffing his mouth as he progressed. The orphaned pies adorned the table that stood between them. They both avoided looking at each other. Still with diverted eyes she extended an uncertain hand and touched his shoulder. He shrank under her stroke, so she withdrew and sat up, tense, straddling the edge of a recliner.

Thus, they circled one another wearily. A longcase clock ticked minutes and then hours before my aunt got up, mauling her wide-brimmed hat, and said: "I must be going now", and Uzi nodded, devouring yet another orange. He didn't even rise to bid farewell.

"I'll come to visit you" – she promised but her pledge sounded tinny and rehearsed. Uzi consumed the fruit and stared intently at the floor. His mother took my soiled palm in hers and exited the house. No one escorted us to the gate or to the grimy station. We stood there, in the sweltering sun, until we heard the bus, uproarious, like echoes of a far-off battle.

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Pierre's Friends

by Sam Vaknin

Pierre is terrified. Not hard to tell. The bald patches on his egg-shaped skull exude pearly sweat from sooty pores, a salty path down to his darkening collar. He thrusts two alcohol-swollen fingers and loosens his shabby necktie. His bloodshot eyes dart from one grimy corner of the restaurant to another, avoiding Eli's.

The three of us are seated awkwardly on the porch of an unfashionable eatery, crinkling the paper menus. Pierre orders an espresso. Eli and I dismiss the hovering waiter impatiently. So now, Pierre sips his lukewarm swill as we observe him closely. He coughs, expelling coffee grounds all over. We don't recoil. He chokes.

Only the day before it was my turn to writhe. I landed in the minuscule and gleaming airport, picked up my battered suitcase, and tailed the passport control procession. Throughout it all, I couldn't stop shivering.

A uniformed officer of the Border Police leafed gravely through my documents, comparing them to a neatly printed list. He picked up the receiver of an antiquated phone and tugged at its snaky cord. I strained to overhear the words that may condemn me.

But the inevitable cannot be hastened. I stood there, a rabbit caught in legal headlights on time's highway, awaiting the terminal collision with my life. I watched mayhem unfold, as each official summoned others to consult.

At last I was approached and asked with firm civility to accompany a prim official to a cubicle. He placed himself behind a rickety table but offered me no seat. I remained standing. He then proceeded to inaudibly recite the questions printed on a faded form and I responded.

He leaned back and demanded to know in which hotel I had reserved a room. I told him. It was a small establishment proffering basic services. He nodded approvingly: I must be a solid, thrifty person to have chosen such accommodation. It sort of placed us both, despite his social inferiority, on equal footing.

He solemnly informed me, in ominously florid phraseology, that I am the subject of a full investigation whose gravity cannot be overestimated. He asked me not to leave town – or even my hotel – till it is over. Do I

fully understand, he queried. I nodded brusquely and noted the gleeful smirk with which he handed back my passport, duly stamped.

I hailed a yellow cab and helped its driver stow my baggage in the trunk. Around a flowery mound, we headed straight to town and to my lodgings.

The first thing I did was place a call to Eli. Surprisingly, it was he who picked up the phone.

He heard my convoluted tale – I felt his gathering gloom – asked several questions and concluded:

"Your place, tonight."

Still listening to the dial tone, I lay across the bed and contemplated the blotchy ceiling, projecting overflowing fears into the aqueous blots.

Eli will be here, I could count on him, he loved me as a son, a twin, a soul mate. We were complementary: I only knew about things that he experienced. I couldn't capture him in words like "streetwise". Eli was life itself: innocuously cruel, indifferently relentless, single-mindedly propagative, amoral, steeped in gallows humour.

My employer insisted that Pierre admitted to a conspiracy to pass on weighty secrets – commercial and political – to the press. He swept aside my vehement protestations and railed at me for wanting to destroy his business empire, his life's achievement. Pierre confessed in the police interrogation, he seethed.

It was now up to an investigating magistrate to decide whether to indict us both.

I knotted my tie the way Eli taught me and donned a jacket. Bathed in a springtime sun, I headed towards the flower clock near the marina by the lake. It ticked away its scented, multicoloured time in pensive melancholy. I felt forlornly relieved. Whatever the outcome of the proceedings, I knew this chapter ends.

I recalled myself facing this timepiece on my first day in town – diminutive and lost, clad in a cut-price suit of itchy blue with golden stripes. I had it custom-made in the West Bank. I enviously sneaked furtive glances at the ubiquitous tall, well-tailored, Aryan men who roamed the streets.

In time, I, too, improved attire. My climb was meteoric: department head, division chief, then two divisions, vice president. I became a welcome guest in the hoary mountaintops and charmed castles of the world's affluent and mighty.

I mulled four years of images while genteelly strolling down the promenade, unfastening my necktie and nibbling at a colossal ice cream cone. At last, I flung my reefer on one shoulder, stuffing the stifling tie in an inside pocket. Unshackled, though officially confined, I hummed a tune and drifted aimlessly.

Back at the hotel, Eli, submerged in a strategically-situated lounge, leafed through the oversized pages of a local rag. He rose with difficulty from his seat and embraced me warmly. Disengaging, he scrutinised me, his two hands on my shoulders. And then another hug.

Sipping Campari orange, Eli attentively listened to my story. His fleshy palms wriggled involuntarily in the more stirring passages, as if to illustrate his mental notes. When I was through, he sighed: "We will extricate you from this mess."

I handed over Pierre's phone number and we went up to my room. Eli surveyed it critically: "Could be worse, I guess." He proceeded to sprawl on the only bed, fully clothed. Waving his legs and matching toes to heels he shed his shoes, displaying threadbare socks.

He shoved a sausagey finger at the phone's rotary dial and pressed it down. It clanged into position. Eli's French was guttural and splintered. His conversation over, he gathered his discarded shoes and muttered: "Let us go."

That is how we came to face Pierre in this cafe. He compulsively passes a venous hand over his blushing baldness, to fend off the breeze.

"You and Shmuel were friends" – Eli implores. Pierre nods eagerly, stealthily peeking at me beneath his furled eyebrows. "This is no way to treat a friend" – Eli hectors him, bending forward, his face skirting his interlocutor's, a burly arm cast casually on creaking armrests.

"What is it that you want?" – Pierre stammers and strokes a lumpy throat. His body petrified, only his hands are squirming on the table, like rodents in a maze.

Eli eyes his discomfiture, amused.

"I want you to tell the truth and only the truth" – he reassures Pierre nonchalantly even as he mutilates a plastic straw and chucks it at Pierre's face. The latter's spectral pallor alternates with crimson.

"We don't want you testify to anything that is not the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Follow the wording of the courtroom oath tomorrow morning" – Eli lunges at Pierre, a breathing distance from his startled face. I couldn't help admiring the bestial move, Eli's proficiency in this survival game, the managed tension between his bulk and supple muscles.

He recoils abruptly, the quintessence of indifferent equanimity.

"But Shmuel gave me the documents" – Pierre says, attempting to resist – "I got the documents from him! How else could I have obtained this highly classified material that's locked in safes?"

Eli nods understandingly. He moistens a corpulent finger and uses it to haul some cigarette residues to Pierre's overflowing ashtray.

"I wonder" – Eli, dreamily – "did he also tell you to sell these crucial data to the local paper with the biggest circulation – and for pennies?"

Pierre swallows hard. Then, ejecting all the air he hoarded since the beginning of our chat, he shakes his head: "No, this was my invention."

Eli glowers at him with feigned astonishment.

"Invention?" – he echoes – "Invention..."

Pierre pounds the soggy butt of his mutilated cigarette under heel.

"I will stick to the truth in court" – he obstinately reiterates. Eli's angelic smile.

"But I will tell them that Shmuel was the source of these cursed documents."

"Only the truth, I told you" – Eli eggs him on solemnly. "Don't stray either left or right. If Shmuel was enough of a fool to give the files to unauthorised personnel, that is his problem, not yours" – a pause. "In any case, I understand that he didn't touch a centime from the fee the magazine paid you."

Pierre looks intently at the river.

"No" – he admits – "Shmuel didn't even know I'm going to do it, my liaison with the paper" – reanimated – "I didn't share with him because he never was my partner!"

"Superb, superb!" – Eli enthuses – "It is such a pleasure to hold a fruitful conversation with someone as intelligent as you. By the way, what are you doing now that you've been fired? You got a job? Perhaps a hobby?"

Pierre's lips uncurl bitterly. He straightens his battered spectacles on his shiny nose and passes an amnesiac hand on long-gone hair.

"Nothing" – he exclaims, examining Eli with hurtful slyness – "The boss dumped me like that, no severance fee, no nothing, simply because he caught me drinking on the job."

Eli snaps calloused fingers. He orders a glass of the finest whiskey for his guest. Pierre smiles gratefully.

"We do a lot of business in Europe, Shmuel and I" – Eli expounds – "We need faithful, quick-witted collaborators. I promise you, we don't throw people to the street after years of dedicated service without enough to buy a drink on such a lovely day."

Pierre moans as he consumes the amber potion. His eyes flit between Eli and myself. His cheekbones drip perspiring beads into his beverage. He doesn't wipe them. His nostrils flare. He gulps again.

"Settled then" – Eli concludes – "I am delighted to have met you. We now have friends in common. We will keep in touch. We shan't forget you" – but he stays put.

Shocked into action by this brusque farewell, Pierre dries his lips with greasy sleeve and begs:

"Just let me give you my details..."

Eli's entire face implodes into a thin-lipped leer. He taps Pierre's stooping shoulder and pronounces:

"We will find you, worry not. We always find our friends. Your address is (it was). Your phone, though currently unlisted, is (the number). You share apartment with (her name). Your only child lives with his mother in this address (true)."

We turn our backs on a confounded Pierre and down the steps that lead into the street. I watch him slumped, staring ahead, the glass half raised and tilted.

Eli commands: "Let's take a cab, I am bushed. But first, go back there and pay for all the drinks. Surely you don't expect me to pick up the tab as well?"

I leave him standing in the middle of the thoroughfare and return to Pierre, the catatonic. I place a note of a hundred francs in front of him but do not say a word. He waves his hand in feeble, interrupted, protest.

Eli catnaps on the back seat of a waiting cab.

"To the hotel" – I tell the driver. Eli wakes.

He growls:

"It is the last time I am here to save your ass, you hear me?"

Standing at the entrance of our plain hotel, he grabs my shoulders and turns me around ferociously to face him.

He stares at me the way he did at Pierre:

"This is the last time, you hear me? There will be no more"

I nod, he smiles, and we embrace.

[Return](#)

Death of the Poet

By Sam Vaknin

Read the [Hebrew original](#).

The poet succumbed at eight o'clock AM.

Five minutes prior to his death, he made use of a stained rotary dial phone, its duct-taped parts precariously clinging to each other. His speech was slurred but his interlocutor – a fan – thought it nothing extraordinary.

Sighing ostentatiously, she reluctantly agreed to come to him, volubly replacing her receiver in its cradle.

She was not surprised to be met by others he had called, nor was she astounded to learn that he had died all by himself, wrapped in two dusty khaki blankets, sprawled on a tattered mattress, flung on an iron frame that served as both bed and escritoire. It was so like him, to die like that.

Removing the rigged cadaver through the narrow doorway was tricky. The medics rolled it down the claustrophobic and penumbral staircase (there was no lift). His ink-tainted right hand kept striking the peeling yarns of greenery that hung, flayed, from crumbling concrete walls.

Panting, they laid him on the bottom stair, an outsized embryo with jet black hair and eagled nose. His nostrils quivered.

The radio reported his passing and lengthy obituaries adorned tomorrow's press. The critics cloaked with affected objectivity the overpowering disdain they held the man, his lifestyle, and his work in. They claimed to have been his closest friends and recounted some futile anecdotes.

The ceremony held by the municipality in the Writers Hall was open to the public.

I said to Nomi:

"Why don't you approach the organisers? Tell them that you have composed music to some of his poems and that you are willing to perform them."

They were thrilled and Nomi settled on two songs – one that I liked and one that was her preference. She had a fortnight to rehearse them ceaselessly.

Then Dani phoned me. Years ago, still adolescent, he co-starred with the poet in a television show. They spent the night discoursing, which rendered them inseparable thereafter, the apprentice and his mentor. Because Dani is

what he is – he turned into the poet's fan. And because he is what he is – he abruptly brought it to a halt. They never met again. Dani never thinks of himself in terms of extremism but his relationship with the dead poet was such.

And now he enquired:

"You heard? He is dead."

But he did not pause for a response. He went on to recount the by now familiar story of how they met, and how he admired the poet's ingenuity, inventiveness, aplomb, the love he made to the Hebrew language. And how it was all over.

"I am not attending this fallacious wake" – Dani is soft-spoken even when his words are not.

That evening, Nomi and I went to the Writers' Hall. A woman with anorectic eyes compared our invitation to a clammy list. We slumped into some wooden deck chairs, attired steamily in our discomfiture. People climbed onto a squeaky stage and then retreated, having recited the poet's work in a post-mortem elocution. They argued with venomous scholarship some fine points.

The poet's raisiny and birdlike mother was all aflutter in the front row, flanked by the agitated organisers. She flung herself at the poet's ex spouse and at her son, protesting creakily and waving a hefty purse:

"Away with you!" – she screamed – "You killed my boy!"

The divorcee approached, her black dress rustling, hand soothingly extended, but midway changed her mind and climbed the podium.

She promised anodynely to preserve the poet's heritage by issuing a definitive edition of his writings, both published and in manuscript. Her voice was steady, her gestures assured, her son clung to her dress eyeing us and the scenery indifferently. He dismounted as he climbed, obediently and unaffectedly.

On cue, Nomi sang two bits, her voice a luscious blond. She looked so lonesome onstage, a battered playback cassette-recorder, a wireless microphone, her quaking palms. When the last note died I discovered that I am not breathing and that I turned her notepad into pulp.

On her odyssey from stage to seat, Nomi glanced coyly at the poet's still roiled mother, who hastened to hug and compliment her warmly.

The night was over and the mob dispersed.

The poet's mother stood forlorn, tugging at the impatient sleeves of the departing as she demanded: "How shall I get back?" – but she wouldn't say whereto. Roundly ignored by the pulsating throngs of well-wishers, she watched them comparing impressions, exchanging phone numbers, mourning the poet and, through his agency, themselves.

"I knew your son" – I said.

I really did – perhaps not as intimately as a friend, but probably more than did most of those present. Once I visited that warehouse of weathered books he called his home, sat on his monkish bed, played the effaced keys of his battered typewriter.

I offered her a ride and she accepted, sighing with childish relief.

Nomi drove and I listened to the poet's mother. Like him she wept in words.

"He used to visit me every week" – with pride. Invited us for a drink in her room at the seniors' home. The evening chilled, she observed. How about a warm libation ("I have even hot chocolate"). When we declined politely, she tempted us with exclusive access to letters the poet wrote to her.

We took a rain check and made a heartening spectacle out of noting down her address and her phone number.

The night guard at the entrance, besieged by a polished wooden counter and facing banks of noiseless television screens, winked at us.

"Thank you for bringing her back. A wonderful woman but lousy kids. No one ever visits."

He turned to face the poet's mother, raising his voice unnecessarily:

"And how are you tonight?"

Ignoring him, she eyed us inquisitively:

"You have children? No? What are you waiting for?" – her shrivelled finger spiralling – "Make a few children and hurry about it. Believe me, nothing in life is more important. Nothing if not..."

The swooshing elevator doors, an amputated sentence, and she was gone.

At home, we lay on our backs, each in its corner of our bed, trying to pierce the darkness blindly.

We never mentioned that evening, neither have we returned to visit the poet's mother. We came close to doing so, though. One Saturday we mutely decided to climb the hill and drop by the seniors' home. Instead, we ventured further, to Jaffa, and bought Sambusak pastry, filled with boiled eggs and acrid cheese.

Side by side we lived, my Nomi and I.

And then she divorced me and so many things transpired that the poet and his mother and this story were all but forgotten.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[The Narcissist's Mother](#)

The Delusional Way Out

Narcissists and Women

Narcissists - Stable or Unstable?

To Age with Grace

The Two Loves of the Narcissist

Studying my Death

Physique Dysmorphique

Why do I Write Poetry?

Poetry of Healing and Abuse: My Poems

The Narcissist's Addiction to Fame and Celebrity

Acquired Situational Narcissism

Narcissistic Parents

The Narcissist's Dead Parent

The Narcissist and His Family

The Narcissist's Confabulated Life

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

This part is meant only to provoke thoughts. It is not a substitute to independent thinking, criticism, and analysis.

Both the poet and his mother in the story are narcissists - but of two different types. How come one variety of narcissist gives rise to another?

Do you feel the emotional incest between the poet and his mother? Do you think it played any part in the formation of his narcissism? Do you think this is the reason he refuses to visit her?

The mother denies the reality of her estrangement from her son. Is strong denial an integral part of narcissism and how does one facilitate the other?

Would you regard the mother as abusive? Are smothering and doting forms of abuse?

The poet dies lonely and desolate. Is this the way narcissists typically end their lives (no wishful thinking, please ...:o))

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Redemption

by Sam Vaknin

My grandfather sat on a divan, back stiff and eyes tight-shut, when the news arrived. At the age of seventy, his body still preserved the womaniser's tensile, proud, virility. He dyed his hair jet black. Original Moroccan music, wistful and lusty, the desert's guttural refrain, poured forth from a patinated gramophone. The yearning tarred his cheeks with bloodied brush, a capillary network that poured into his sockets.

Now, facing him distraught, my father was reciting gingerly the information about his little sister, confessing abject failure as the clan's firstborn. His elder sister died in youth but even had she lived she wouldn't have qualified to supervise the brood due to her gender. It was my father's role to oversee his younger siblings, especially the females, the thus preserve the honour of his kinfolk.

Being a melancholy and guarded man, he blamed them for conspiring against him. He envied them instead of loving. He kept strict ledgers of help received and given. He felt deprived, begrudging their successes. They drifted apart and my father turned into unwelcome recluse, visited only by my tyrannical grandfather. On such occasions, my father was again a battered, chided, frightened child.

That day, with manifest obsequiousness, he served the patriarch with tea and home-made pastry arranged on brightly illustrated tin trays. My grandpa muttered balefully, as was his wont, and sank his dentures into the steamy dough, not bothering to thank him.

As dusk gave way to night, my father fetched the grouser's embroidered slippers and gently placed his venous, chalky feet on a dilapidated stool. He wrapped them in a blanket. Thus shoed and well-ensconced, the old man fell asleep.

These loving gestures – my father's whole repertoire – were taken by my grandpa as his due, a pillar of the hierarchy that let him beat his toddler son and send him, in eerie pre-dawn hours, to shoulder bursting wineskins. This is the order of the world: one generation serves another and elder brothers rule their womenfolk.

"Whore" – my grandpa sneered. His voice subdued, only his face conveyed his crimson wrath. My father nodded his assent and sat opposed, sighing in weariness and resignation.

"Whose is it, do we know?" – my grandpa probed at last. My father snuffed the ornamental music and shrugged uncertainly. My grandpa rubbed his reddened eyelids and then slumped.

"We need to find him and arrange a wedding" – he ruled. My father winced, propelled by the incisive diction into the grimy alleys of his childhood, the wine tide and ebbing in the pelt containers, the origin of his recurrent nightmares, nocturnal shrieks, sweaty relief when nestled in my mother's arms, his brow soaked, his heart in wild percussion.

"Today it's different, Abuya" – my father mumbled, using the Moroccan epithet. My grandpa whipped him with a withering glower.

"I will depart tomorrow" – my father whispered – "But I don't wish to talk to her."

"Don't do it" – consented grandpa, his eyes still shut, waving a steady hand in the general direction of the decimated music – "Just salvage our dignity and hers."

The next day, father packed his crumbling cardboard suitcase, the one he used when he fled Morocco, a disillusioned adolescent. He neatly folded in some underwear and faded-blue construction worker's sleeveless garments. On top he placed a rusting razor and other necessities.

I watched him from the porch, he waning, a child size figure, going to the Negev, the heartless desert, to restore through a defiled sister the family's blemished honour. He stood there, leaning on the shed, patiently awaiting the tardy transport. The bus digested him with eager exhalation.

He has been away for four days and three nights. The fine dust of distant places has settled in his stubble. He wiped his soles on the entrance rug, removed soiled clothes and gave them to my mother. He slipped into his tunic and his thongs, uttering in barely audible relief, then sank into an armchair.

My mother served up scolding tea in dainty cups. He sipped it absent-minded, dipping a sesame cracker in the minty liquid. Having reposed, he sighed and stretched his limbs. He never said a word about the trip.

A few months passed before his sister called. She phoned during the day, attempting to avoid my father, who was at work. My mother spoke to her, receiver in abraded hand like hot potato.

We were all invited to her forthcoming wedding. She was to marry a Northern, elder man of means. He will adopt the child, she added. Still enamoured with her elusive lover, she admitted, it wasn't the hideous affair we made it out to be. These days and nights (too short) of lust and passion in the wasteland have yielded her a daughter, a flesh memento of her paramour.

My mother listened stone-faced. "We cannot come" – she said, her voice aloof – "my husband won't allow it." But we all wish her happiness in newfound matrimony. In the very last second, as she was replacing the

handset in its cradle, she whispered, maybe to herself: "Take care of you and of the little one."

She subsided on the stool, next to the phone, and scrutinised the blank wall opposite her. I busily pretended not to notice her tearful countenance.

When my father came back from his excruciating work on the scaffolds, my mother laid the table. They dined silently, as usual. When he finished, she cleared the dishes, placing them in lukewarm water. "Your little sister called" – she told him – "She is inviting us to her wedding up north. She is marrying a wealthy man rather older than herself, so all's well that ends well. At least she won't be destitute."

"None of my concern" – interjected my father gruffly, heavily rising from the chair.

The following day he travelled south, to meet my grandpa. He then proceeded to see his other brothers and his sisters. That over, he returned, called in sick and remained at home for weeks.

When his youngest sibling, my uncle, came to visit, my father embraced him warmly. He loved them all but only this Benjamin reciprocated. My father pampered him and listened attentively to his seafaring tales, echoes of distant places, among the glasses of scented Araq, a powerful absinthe. They munched on sour carrots dipped in oil.

At last, my father raised the subject. Retreating to our chambers, we left them there to thrash the matter out through the night. Their voices drifted, raised and then restrained. My father shrilly argued but his brother countered self-convinced. He packed and left in the early hours of the morning.

My father entered our room, defeated, and tucked us in unnecessarily. He turned off all the lights, a distended, dismal shadow, and surveyed us, his beefy shoulder propped against the doorframe.

My mother instructed us severely:

"If daddy's youngest brother calls, don't answer. Nor he neither his wayward sister are part of our family. Your father excommunicated them forever and cursed their lineage. They have disgraced us. Now they are perfect strangers."

I liked my uncle – boyish and outgoing, hair long, and smooth, and often brushed and dried, his clothes the latest fashion from abroad. He was a seaman. His visits smelled of outlying cities and sinful women thin-clad in bustling ports. He carried stacks of foreign bills stashed in his socks and bought my mother foreign, costly fragrances (she buried them among her lingerie until they all evaporated).

At the bottom of his magic chest lay booklets with titillating tales of sizzling sex and awesome drug lords. I waited for his visits with the impatience of an inmate. He was the idol of my budding willfulness and nascent freedom. I resented our forced estrangement.

And so began my mutiny. Lured by the siren songs of far-flung lands, of sexual liberation, and of equality, I travelled to my grandma's home, an uninvited guest. My uncle, whose name now we could not pronounce, was there. We strolled the windswept promenade of Beer-Sheba, kicking some skeletal branches as we talked. He treated me as an adult.

Then it was time to return. My father, aware of my encounter, regarded it as treason, another broken link in the crumbling chain of his existence. To him, I was a co-conspirator. I shamed him publicly. He felt humiliated in his own abode. He didn't say a thing, but not long after, he signed me over to the army as a minor. My mother tremblingly co-signed and mutely pleaded with my father to recant.

But he would not. Immersed in hurt, he just imploded, blankly staring at the television screen. He took to leaping anxiously with every phone ring, instructing us in panic to respond. He didn't want to talk to anyone, he promised.

When I enlisted, he accompanied me to the draft board. Evading any contact, he occupied a tiny, torturous wooden stool. He didn't budge for hours and didn't say a word and didn't kiss farewell, departing with a mere "goodbye". I watched him from the bus' window as he receded, stooped, into a public park. He collapsed onto a bench and waved away the pigeons that badgered him for breadcrumbs. Finally, he let one near and kicked her with his shoe. They scattered.

I didn't visit, not even on vacations. I found father-substitutes, adopted other families as home. At times, I would remember him, a tiny, lonely figure, on a garden bench, surrounded by the birds.

One day, my service in the army nearly over, my mother called and said: "Your father wants you here."

At once I felt like burdened with premonitory sadness, with the belated anguish of this certain moment. She told me that my uncle died in shipwreck.

"His cousin was with him to the end. He clung on to a plank all night, till dawn. He fought the waves and floated. And then they heard him mutter: what's the point and saw him letting go and sinking under. They say he drowned tranquil and composed."

I alighted from the belching bus before it reached my parents', traversing accustomed pathways, touching childhood trees, pausing in front of the boarded cinema house, a fading poster knocking about its peeling side. A titian cloud of falling leaves engulfed it all. The sea roared at a distance as if from memory.

I knocked, my father opened. We contemplated one another, vaguely familiar. Alarming corpulence and evil hoary streaks. Time etched its brown ravines in sagging flesh, the skin a flayed protection. He spread his arms and hugged me. I cautiously accepted and dryly kissed his stubble.

He ushered me inside and sat me by my brothers. I greeted them in silence. My father helped my mother serve refreshments, peeled almonds and solid confitures. We sulked in mounting discomfort.

Sighing, my father rose and climbed the spiral staircase to his room. He soon returned, clad in his best attire, his synagogue and festive uniform, the suit he wore in my Bar-Mitzvah.

Like birds after the storm the house was filled with curled rabbis. Flaunting their garb, grimly conferring with my father, they eyed the table critically.

"There's more!" – my mother hastened – "There's food, after you finish."

"Are these all your children?" – they demanded and my father, blushing, soon admitted that my sister wants no part in the impending ceremony. They nodded sympathetically. They linked their talliths (prayer shawls) into a huppah (wedding canopy) and ordered us to squat beneath it.

They blessed the house, its inhabitants and future monotonously. My father's face illuminated, his eyes aglow. He handed each rabbi and each cantor a folded envelope from an overflowing pocket in his vest and poured them Araq to warm their hoarsely throats. They gulped the fiery libations, chanting their invocations as they swallowed.

With marked anticipation they assumed the better seats around the table and plunged into my mother's dishes. She waited on them deferentially. Burping aloud, the food devoured, they broke into a vigorous recital of pious hymns.

Night fell and my father entered the guest room and settled by my bed. He drew the covers to my chin and straightened wrinkled corners.

"We blessed the house" – he said – "to fend off a disaster."

I asked him what he was afraid of. He told me that he cursed his brother to die young and now that he did, my father was anxious.

"You loved him very much" – I said and he averted his face.

Waves clashed with undulating ripples to deafening effect.

"There will be a storm tonight" – my dad said finally.

"I guess so" – I agreed – "Good night. I am bushed, I need to rise and shine early, back to the army."

I turned around to face to the naked wall.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[*The Narcissist and His Family*](#)

[*Narcissists and Women*](#)

[*The Mind of the Abuser*](#)

[*Condoning Abuse*](#)

[*The Anomaly of Abuse*](#)

[*Indifference and Decompensation*](#)

[*Narcissism, Psychosis, and Delusions*](#)

[*The Cult of the Narcissist*](#)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

This part is meant only to provoke thoughts. It is not a substitute to independent thinking, criticism, and analysis.

How many narcissists do you identify in this story?

How did the grandfather's pathology affect his son's and grandson's mental health?

To what extent is the grandfather's mental health problems due to his cultural background?

Are narcissists superstitious? What is the possible connection between these two traits - narcissism and prejudice?

The grandfather is a misogynist (women-hater). Can we say the same about the other male figures in this family?

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Shalev is Silent

By Sam Vaknin

Read the [Hebrew original](#).

Shalev's ample back is propped against the laundry dryer and he is keeping silent. It jerks, he jolts, eyes downcast, his short-sleeved T-shirt defenceless against the arctic ambiance.

"Shalev, say something" – I mutter. He only smiles. It is my daybreak plea, repeated each morning since he quietened.

By way of responding, he turns to face the glass eye of the coinless Laundromat, his stooping shoulders focused upon the swirling garments. He motions to me to lay my wash on a truncated soggy wooden slab.

The laundry room is high ceilinged. Rags decomposing hang flayed on oxblood iron juts, stabbing four walls coarsely mortared by the inmates. Pipes conjoined with mouldy tape drip onto the twin contraptions – the malignantly oversized washer and dryer.

Shalev is average height but way obese. His wild stubble and wire glasses accentuate his burliness, the towering machinery, the vaulted chamber. "The Cyclops's Cave", I call it and well-read Shalev just chuckles. He casts a longing glance at a pile of books and snacks awaiting in his "Promised Corner". But he wouldn't say a word.

I occupied one of the twin armchairs in the ironing parlour and set the backgammon board to play. Shalev was preceded in this job by a transvestite whose nocturnal off-key strains of yearning were still evoked. Forced to sequester him away from virile lust – both others' and his own – the prison authorities allowed him to import his shoddy furniture into the concrete monastery that later became the washroom.

Shalev slept in his predecessor's bed and kept his munchies in his metal bureau, coated with peeling sepia paper cuttings. Now, he sank into the matching armchair, arranging his limbs gingerly, as though preparing to inventory them. He smoothed his feral moustache with two stubby stained fingers and studied the board alertly.

He then rose from his seat, swung shut the door but didn't bolt it (regulations). To fend off the gloom, I stretched over and turned on the milky lights above his bookshelf. His wife got him some of the volumes and others he borrowed from the prison's library, my workplace.

Shalev inclined and smothered a round piece with a bulky fingertip. He drove it to a screeching halt next to a corner of the patterned board. Then, content, he fisted the yellowed dice and hurled them at the table. Six-six. His eyes aflame, he basked in this auspicious opening.

I waited with bated breath for an exclamation of his evident exuberance – but Shalev just proceeded to conjure his pieces into and out of existence in a whirlwind of clattering dice and scraping moves and sweaty palms. He suppressed even his customary snickers at my clumsiness. Perhaps chortling was too akin to speech.

"Shalev" – I said – "why have you stopped talking? Why don't you laugh anymore? Why the silence?"

He flings a pair of agitated dice at me. I groan as I pick them off the gooey floor.

"Listen" – I persisted – "I have an idea." An involuntary twitch betrayed his interest.

"Why don't you write what you have to say? We will prepare a stack of small cards here and you could jot on them to your heart's content."

"What cannot be said in words, can sometimes be expressed in letters."

Shalev froze and for a minute there I thought I lost him. Then he nodded his head excitedly. I abandoned him and his victory over me and bolted outside, into the greying drizzle. I crossed two lanes muddied by steamy kitchen waste and absconded with a pack of printing paper from the library. Hiding them under my tattered blemished coat, I hastened to the laundry room.

Shalev arranged the pieces in two equidimensional towers of alternating black and white. I proudly presented my paper loot. We used a ruler and scissors to divide them into squares. And all that protracted time I prayed that Shalev will not devolve from verbal to written taciturnity.

Shalev held the ordinary pen I gave him as though he never handled a writing implement before. He scrawled his tortured letters excruciatingly:

"I want to ask you for a big favour."

The dryer banged spasmodically and ceased.

"I want you to explain to my wife why I am keeping silent."

The hush was broken only by the sounds of his laboured scribbling.

"I have a feeling that no one loves me anymore. She is distancing herself and I am losing my daughters. When on vacation, I am a stranger in my own home, with no authority or recognition. It feels so helpless. I cannot hold on to them. Tonight I dreamt that I am screaming as they retreated, eerily oblivious to my pleading, to my words. So I decided to keep quiet. Tell her all that for me, will you?"

I nodded and he lifted himself from the crumbling armchair, hugging my soiled clothes, and trotting towards the rumbling, cornered appliance.

The following morning, at six o'clock, the warden bawled our names, marking those present. Enconced in dreary blazers, we fended off the chill. Shalev, wearing his semipternal T-shirt, leaned on the barrack wall. "Stand straight" – the warden barked and cast an evil glance. Shalev recoiled dreamily. "Who's missing?" – our sentinel demanded and, not waiting for an answer, invaded our windswept accommodation.

"You, come with me" – he motioned to Shalev – "The staff complained yesterday. Clothes were amiss. What happened?"

Shalev kept mum.

"He doesn't talk" – somebody volunteered – "He is on a strike." And wicked sniggering.

"What is it that I am told?" – the warden shrilled – "You are not talking? With this scum" – his outstretched hand enclosed us all, a brown effluence – "you can do whatever you want. But with the authorities of this facility, you hear, you will respond! Clear?"

Shalev just nodded absentmindedly. This far from innocuous acquiescence infuriated our guardian.

"It is not the last you hear of me" – he spat and trotted towards the management's stone parapet, splashing jets of mud on our rubber boots. Shalev grabbed my arm and navigated me towards the prisoners' public phone. Today was his turn to make use of it, his ten minutes with the outside world.

A big, uniformed, crowd surrounded the booth. Everyone knew by now about Shalev's weird protest. They came here to loot his minutes, to scavenge the carrion of his allotted phone call. When they saw me, they hummed in disappointment and dispersed, only to perch on the nearby benches, just in case.

Torrential rain volleyed the butt-scorched and graffiti-tattooed plastic shell with itinerant orange leaves. I held on to the scarred receiver and dialled Shalev's home, his family.

His wife picked up. I recalled her deceptive fragility and her two well-attired, well-mannered offspring. She always carried baskets with her – one with food and one full of reading material. They did not bother to inspect their contents at the gate anymore, that's how predictable she was.

"Hello, this is Shmuel" – I said and read the note to her.

Silence ensued, chased by defiant sobbing:

"This is not true. We do love him" – whimpers.

"Shalev" – I hesitated, distressed, under the shadows cast by his hirsute skull – "Shalev, please, she is crying..."

To the receiver:

"I am giving you Shalev."

Shalev held the handset in his plump hand and listened attentively.

"Are you there?"

He kept mute for many minutes, digging a moat of silence against the verbal onslaught of his wife. He listened to his daughters, head tilted, eyes moist, lips clenched.

Then, gently, he replaced the mouthpiece in its cradle, stifling his children's whining.

There he stood, bent, broken, brow kissing the frosty metal, reluctantly driven away by the minacious grumblings of his fellow inmates. He mournfully dragged his feet along the silt-spattered road to our barracks. Sometimes he stopped and kicked a gravel listlessly, watching its trajectory transfixed, until it hit the rustling bush and vanished.

"Hey, you!" – it was the warden, materialising with the greyness of an impeccable camouflage.

"The chief wants to talk to you about your silence."

Shalev's eyes shifted in the manner of a hunted game. A muscle pulsed wildly in his cheek.

"He doesn't speak" – I ventured, head bowed, eyes locked on the grimy shoes of our custodian – "I can accompany him. He corresponds with me and..."

"You do what you are told to do" – the words awhipping, eyes socketed in bloodshot red – "or you will end up just like him, in the solitary!"

Bad winds thrashed Shalev's flimsy summer shirt as he descended towards the patched glass door at the entrance to the headquarters.

Back in the barracks, I sat cross-legged on Shalev's bed, eyeing his neatly folded blankets, clean smelling, flower-patterned sheets, the mound of books under his night lamp.

I got up, tucked my shirttails into my cord-held trousers and crossed the square between the barracks and the management. Shalev was seated, overflowing, on a tiny stone bench, studying his fingers as he crossed and then uncrossed them. He rubbed the sole of one of his boots against the other. His lips, tightened pale, contrasted morbidly with the inkiness of his beard and whiskers.

"Go away" – ordered the warden offhandedly.

"Shalev" – I said but he did not react – "I have an offer to make. Give me your silence. I want to buy it from you. Let me be the one to go to the chief and then refuse to talk to him. You tell him that everything is fine, that it was all one big misunderstanding, that you had a fight with your wife, with your family. Apologise profusely. After we exit, I will give you back your silence, I swear to you."

Shalev exerted himself and raised his head, watching me intently. But then his chin drooped and I chastised myself: "you lost him, you lost him" and I wanted to beat myself unconscious.

The warden shook his head in mute disdain.

The silence was broken by the smoke-drenched curses of prisoners and staff, as they crossed the link chained paths. A woman staffer exited, banging a wooden frame behind her portly figure. She scrutinised the warden questioningly, a sooty cigarette hanging from the corner of a lipstick smear:

"This is Shalev?"

"That's me" – said Shalev – "I am ready now. I will talk to you."

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[*What is Abuse?*](#)

[*Ambient Abuse*](#)

[*Abuse by Proxy*](#)

[*The Weapon of Language*](#)

[*The Green Eyed Narcissist*](#)

[*Narcissism and Other People's Guilt*](#)

[*Narcissists and Women*](#)

[*The Spouse / Mate / Partner of the Narcissist*](#)

[*The Narcissist and His Family*](#)

[*Narcissists - Stable or Unstable?*](#)

[*The Two Loves of the Narcissist*](#)

[*Acquired Situational Narcissism*](#)

[*The Narcissist's Object Constancy*](#)

[*Inner Dialog, Cognitive Deficits, and Introjects in Narcissism*](#)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

This part is meant only to provoke thoughts. It is not a substitute to independent thinking, criticism, and analysis.

Shalev gives his nearest and his dearest the "silent treatment". How does the narcissist use language and silence to abuse others?

What is the role of jealousy and envy in the narcissistic pathology?

Shalev is using me to communicate with his family. Why? And why does he ultimately speak to his wife?

Narcissists are control freaks. Like an infant, the narcissist feels that things and people stop to exist if he can't see them with his own eyes and manipulate them. This is called deficient object constancy. How does Shalev cope with it?

[Return](#)

Pet Snail

by Sam Vaknin

Read the [Hebrew original](#).

Nomi and I had a snail. We placed it in any empty ice-cream packing, on a bed of lettuce. We took turns spraying it with water drops. Morning come, Nomi would emerge from our bed, her face dishevelled, and sleepwalk to enquire how the snail was doing. She rejoiced with every black-rimmed bite, clapping her hands and drawing me to witness the tiny miracle. She replaced the perforated leaf with a green and dewy one about once a week.

At first, her minuscule charge concealed itself among the decaying greenery. Nomi spent hours, patiently awaiting a revelation. Crowned with a set of dark, huge earphones that I bought her, she pounded her keyboard, keeping a lovat eye on the snail's abode.

When it finally emerged one day, the music stopped and she exclaimed elatedly.

Later that year, I was sentenced to a prison term. On the way home, courtroom echoes reverberated in the hushed interior of the car. Nomi said: "Let's go somewhere before..." And I responded: "Let us go to Eilat, to our hotel."

"A pity the jazz festival is over" – she frowned. "A pity" – I agreed.

At home, an air of doom, we packed a hasty suitcase and booked the flight.

A thing I said reminded Nomi of the snail. She held its lair in both her hands and placed it accusingly on the glass top table in the living room.

"What shall we do with it?"

"Let's leave it enough water and food for a whole week" – I suggested – "His needs are few, he is so teeny, so I don't think there'll be a problem."

Nomi secured an errant golden curl behind her ear: "You sure?" I was and so we entombed him beneath some salad leaves and showered him with water and Nomi giggled: "To him it's rain." Then she grew serious.

It was an early morning. Nomi felt my swollen eyelids, pausing her finger on the protruding veins. On the way to the elevator, she stopped, unloaded a laden rucksack and hurried to the entrance door, wildly rummaging for the keys in her multicoloured purse. She returned to me, flushing and panting and uttered: "It is fine!" "It climbed through some lettuce sprouts" – she reported. Her morning voice was moist and hoarse,

Edith Piaf-like. I cast a virile hand over her shoulder and guided her outside.

We spent four days in Eilat. We slept a lot and swam the pools, among the waterfalls and artificial rocks. My sister happened to be staying there with her newly-minted family. But it was already chilly and autumnal and, four nights later, we decided to return. My imminent incarceration loomed and Nomi was typically broody. I tried to comfort her, thinking what a consummate liar I have become.

When we reached home, Nomi dumped her suitcase, precariously balanced on its two hind wheels. I heard the metallic clinking of unfurled bolts and she was gone. A minute or two later: "I can't find it!" and then "It is not here, Sam!"

We cautiously separated one gnawed leaf from another. We studied the inside of the box and its immediate neighbourhood, the marble counter. The snail was nowhere to be found.

Nomi was restless for the remainder of that day. Down hill, at a crossroad, concealed behind a gas station, stood an intimate French restaurant. It was our crisis eatery, a refuge of self-administered great wines and nouvelle cuisine. But today its charms failed. Nomi was crestfallen throughout dinner. She sat and gestured and chewed the food mechanically.

Still, ever so practical, faced with numerous arrangements before my disappearance, she recovered. But she refused to discard the now orphaned container and she made sure the leaves were always fresh and glistening. She thought that I didn't notice how she inspected the box, hoping to find her snail in it, revenant.

"It must be bigger now" – she sighed and then – "Today I plan to clean the entire house. It is your last weekend here."

On cue, I went to the public library and spent a good few hours reading Kafka's "Metamorphosis", a story about a respectable clerk turned loathsome insect in his sleep.

We used to clean the house together, Nomi and I. She would sluice the floor and I would dust, scrub the bathrooms and the kitchen. It was one of the last things we did together before we stopped.

The afternoon was muggy and I walked home, immersed in thought. I found Nomi slouched on an armchair, surrounded by heaps of furniture and bundled carpets. Her face wore tearful makeup, her eyes were distant, and her hair bedraggled. I upturned a chair and faced her, silently.

She pointed speechlessly at the general direction of the kitchen and then subsided.

"I stepped on it, I squashed it" – and added frantically – "I didn't mean to! It is still so small and I don't know how it made it to that corner!"

"It must have climbed the refrigerator and descended to the floor" – I ventured. She signalled me to keep away.

"I had to clean the house because of you, because you are going" – in an accusatory tone.

I didn't know how to respond, so I tiptoed to the kitchen and contemplated the mess of snail and concha on the floor.

"Shall I wipe it off?" – I enquired meekly.

"Now, I don't even have a snail" – tears blended with startling exhalations – "You will be gone, too! I thought we could fight the world, you and I, that we are invincible. But it is not like that at all! We can't even look after one snail together!"

"Are you mad at me?" – I asked and she snorted, part pain and part contempt. She scooped the shattered snail with a paper towel and dumped both in the overflowing trash bin. She froze like that awhile and then, as if reaching a decision, she deposited the box, replete with lettuce leaves, in the garbage can.

"I don't think I am going to need it. I am never going to have another snail" – she paused – "At least not with you."

Ned's Short Life

Lidija returned home all dusty and breathless, as was her habit ever since we have bought the apartment and she embarked on its thorough renovation, long months ago. Between two delicate but strong fingers she held aloft a transparent plastic bag, the kind she used to wrap around half-consumed comestibles in the refrigerator. Instinctively, I extended an inquisitive hand, but she recoiled and said: "Don't! There's a fish in there!" and this is how I saw Ned for the first time.

"He is a male," – Lidija told me – "and Fred is a female". In the crowded and smelly pet shop the salesgirl elaborated on the anatomic differences between the sexes. So, now Fred had a mate.

"Fred" is Fredericka, our first attempt at a goldfish. One of the handymen gave her to Lidija "to keep your husband company while you are away", he explained mischievously. Fred grew up in a bowl and then graduated into a small and rather plain aquarium. I placed a clay elephant and a plastic, one-legged ballerina in it, but this unlikely couple did little to liven it up. Fred's abode stood on the kitchen counter, next to a pile of yellow bananas, flame-orange mandarins, and assorted shrink-wrapped snacks. She swam melancholily to and fro, forlorn and lonely, toying with her own reflection.

A fortnight later, Lidija and I purchased a bigger tank. I filled it with tap water and dumped Fred in it. Shocked and distressed, she hid under a shell and refused to emerge, no matter the temptation. Hence Ned.

I knew next to nothing about new fish tanks, the need to “cycle” them owing to the absence of nitrogen-devouring bacteria, and the stress that all these cause the unfortunate inhabitants of my aquarium. I dumped Ned in the crystal-clear waters as unceremoniously as I did his would-be mate. But Ned – having graduated far worse aquaria in dingy pet shops – swam a few triumphant laps around the receptacle and then settled down to the business of chasing food scraps. Fred eyed him shyly and then joined him hesitantly. It was the first time she had moved in days.

As the time passed, Fred, a codependent goldfish if I ever saw one, excitedly clung to Ned’s bright orange tail and followed him wherever he glided. But Ned did not reciprocate. Far more aggressive than Fred, he deprived her of food, pursuing her in circles and leveraging his longer body and broader amidship to tackle the silvery female. All my exhortations and threats went on deaf ears: Ned would coyly slink away only to resume his belligerence when he figured I am out of range.

Still, every few hours, Fred and Ned would align themselves, as arrow-straight as soldiers on parade, and swing to and fro in unison in the currents, perfectly at peace, their delicate fins flapping regally and slowly. It was a bewitching, hypnotizing manifestation of some primordial order. I used to sit on the armrest of a couch, enthralled by their antics, monitoring who does what to whom with the avidity of a natural scientist and the wonderment of a child. Gradually, the susurrations of the air pump; the gentle breeze of bubbles; and the elegant motility of my fancies all conspired to calm my rampant anxiety. I made a living off the proceeds of books I have written about my mental health disorder and so was gratified to escape the stifling and morbid environment of my own making.

Then, one morning, I woke up to find the couple gasping at the shell-covered bottom of their tank, tail and fins streaking red and rotting away, bit by tiny and ephemeral piece. The magic gone, it was replaced with the nightmarish horror that permeated the rest of my existence. I felt guilty, somehow threatened, imbued with the profound sadness that other people – normal people – associate with grieving. Reflexively, I surfed the Internet frenetically for answers; I downloaded a dozen books and read them; and I got up at all hours of the night to change the water in my Ned and Fred’s minacious cesspool. I woke up with dread and bedded with foreboding and so did my version of Fred, my Lidija.

Ned's body was decaying fast. Fred continuously nudged him: "Are you alive? You come to play?" But, when she saw how serious his condition is, her whole demeanour changed. His swim bladder affected, his dwindling scales plastered with burrowing parasites, besieged by toxic levels of ammonia, Ned's compromised immune system – ravaged by his cramped and foul apprenticeship in the pet shop – didn't stand a chance. He wobbled pitifully. Fred stood next to him, still as a rock, allowing his sore body to rest against hers, giving him respite and the solace of her company. Then, exhausted by her own condition and overpowered by his much larger weight, she would swim away, glancing back sorrowfully as Ned sank and darted, staggered and careened.

Yet, Ned wouldn't give up. His magnificent tail consumed, he still took after the flakes of food that drifted down the water column; he still toured his new home, leftover fins flailing, bullet-like body strained, eyes bulging; he still teased Fred when he could and Fred was much alive when he revived. They slept together, occupying an alcove that afforded them protection from the filter-generated waves.

As the days passed and I added salt to the aquarium, Ned seemed to have recovered. Even his tail began to show some signs of black-tipped resurrection. He regained his appetite and his territorial aggression and Fred seemed delighted to be again abused by a reanimated Ned. I was the proudest of fish-owners. And Lidiya's crystalline laughter reverberated whenever Ned's truncated trunk ballistically caroused the waters.

But this was not to last: the salt had to go. The fresher the water became, the sicker Ned grew, infested with all manner of grey; shrunken; lethargic; and immobile except when fed. This time, he ignored even Fred's ichthyological pleas. Finally, she gave up on him and drifted away sullenly.

One morning, I lowered a tiny net into the water. Ned stirred and stared at the contraption and then, with an effort that probably required every last ounce of his strength, he bubbled up, rolling over and over, like a demented cork, all the while eyeing me, as though imploring: "You see? I am still alive! Please don't give up on me! Please give me another chance!" But I couldn't do that. I kept telling myself that I was protecting Fred's health and well-being, but really I was eliminating the constant source of anxiety and heartbreak that Ned has become.

I captured him and he lay in the net quiescent, tranquil. When his mutilated body hit the toilet, it made a muffled sound and, to me it sounded like "goodbye" or maybe "why". I flushed the water and Ned was gone.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Interview granted to SmokeLong](#)

Randall Brown, SLQ Features Editor:

Hey Sam! Congrats. We at SmokeLong Quarterly are thrilled to have you aboard. As Features Editor, I get the sincere pleasure of conducting the author interviews. Woo-hoo! So let's get it started.

Q. A truly original flash. Where'd it come from?

Answer:

Sorry to be pedestrian - but it is a true story. Those were the hallucinatory days that preceded my incarceration. Everything around me was disintegrating at warp speed: my finances, my marriage, my reputation. In the midst of this surrealistic mayhem, we had our pet snail. In hindsight, it was our last, doomed, attempt to re-connect, to hold on to a semblance of sanity and order and caring. But then the world intruded.

Q. Love the snail. How important is it in flash to have such a central image.

Answer:

The snail is a metaphor. It is us, Nomi and I. It is our life, crumbling around us. It is our helplessness in the face of a crushing and merciless reality. It encapsulates our dwindling trust in each other and our foreknowledge of the end of our relationship. Metaphors are economic ways of communication and, therefore, an invaluable literary tool.

Q. It's his fault. Of course. All of it. What chance for redemption does such a guy have in this world?

Answer:

It is all his fault. Nomi uses the snail to tell me how bitterly disillusioned she is. The aftermath of a shared psychosis and the pursuit of closure are, inevitably, never free of recriminations. Nomi believed in me, in my potential, in the invincibility of my intellect, in my ability to fulfill the promise of a better future for both of us. Instead, I ruined both her life and mine. Instead, I made her crush the snail.

[The Irresponsible Narcissist](#)

[The Accountable Narcissist](#)

[The Objects of the Narcissist](#)

[The Cult of the Narcissist](#)

[The Narcissist as Eternal Child](#)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

This part is meant only to provoke thoughts. It is not a substitute to independent thinking, criticism, and analysis.

Why does Nomi react so strongly to such a minor accident?

Why does she blame me for something that clearly was not my fault?

Nomi trusted me to provide us with a happy future. Was this a delusion, a shared psychosis? Did she really see ME - or an IMAGINED me? Why is she so bitter and disappointed?

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Write Me a Letter

by Sam Vaknin

He looks at me with his single surviving eye and pleads: "Write me a letter."

I smile and remove the women's magazine from his hands. Under "Singles Ads" it says:

"165/33, feminine, rebellious, striking, looking for a man for serious relationship, Postal Box Office."

"Write me a letter" – he repeats and his lonely eye gleams.

"Soon, I am going to get my second, more beautiful one" – he adds apologetically.

We are in a residential caravan in a prison camp, whiling the time away. I am waiting for my inevitable, unnerving, early release and he is looking forward to that feminine, rebellious who will discern in his solitary eye that which he craves to witness in both hers.

I acquiesce and write to her, the mysterious stranger. My writing is calligraphic and Maurice convinces me that it, alone, should make the prospect meet him.

And when she does, it will all be different. He will demonstrate to her that there's a soul concealed in his awkward flesh and how his lonesome eye grasps colours and sun and light and shadows. Lots of shadows.

At night, he wakes, perspiring, stifling whimpering, panicky sounds, like beavers struggling to emerge, consuming his insides, driving the torture wheel called Maurice. He rises from his nightmare and shuffles to the slimy toilettes on the remainder of his leg. When he is back, face rinsed, he looks around, alarmed, climbs laboriously into the upper bunk, and tries to sleep.

But the sirens of that particular patrol car haunt him with red-blue flashes in the desiccated socket of his long-gone eye. He can't erase the gunfire sounds, the streaking bullets that carved his flesh with long, brown scars. The raining glass that gouged his eye erupts anew.

"I lost my eye in the showers" – he nags the dwindling numbers of his unwilling interlocutors. They heard it all before – the tale of Maurice and his magnificent porcelain ball that cost him 5000 New Israeli shekels.

"I was scared, so I pretended to be violent, so they became afraid of me. Everyone knew that I am not to be messed with!"

Maurice recounts to me his prime: replete with eye, a serviceable leg, and human form.

Now he frequents only hookers. He calls them "escort girls". They have been escorting him a long time now and he is a heaving cyclopaedia of their addresses, official prices, negotiating tactics, and final offers. "Half an hour" – he lectures me – "and you can come but once. So you better masturbate before. But you can still strike a bargain with them even if it happens."

He finds them pretty. As far as he is concerned, they are all attractive and stunning and he keeps wondering aloud why they ended up in bed with him. He relishes his good fortune and frequents their cubicles and sweaty cots. "In Haifa, some of them do it for 50 shekels!" – he gasps incredulously.

Maurice does not neglect his physical exercises.

"Am I triangular?" – he demands to know, swerving on his healthy limb, a dented nakedness, we are in the showers, avoiding effluence.

I study him closely. He has a well-developed torso, like a miniature Schwarzenegger. He is trilateral both front and back. His shoulders a triangle, imposed on squarish chest and powerful hands. I tell him so. But Maurice seeks second and third opinions. He circles the muddy pathways of the camp for hours, only a towel to his loins, and pesters every passerby. They all confirm my observations.

"Your stomach is repulsive" – he tells me earnestly – "Stop eating so much. Work out!"

I give him the letter I composed and he ponders it gravely. Then he folds it carefully and withdraws an envelope from his peeling iron dresser.

"Write me the address, too" – he says – "It must be the same hand."

I do so obediently. He inserts the letter in the envelope and licks it. Thus opaque and sealed, he places it gingerly in a drawer.

It joins four identical epistles.

"Maurice, when will you send these letters?" – I demand.

"Soon" – he laughs – "I don't have stamps. Every time I go on detail I forget to buy them. Tomorrow I will remember. Tomorrow I will dispatch them and you will write me more. One of them will surely answer. Something will come out of it."

I suggest to him to address some his missives to the beauties on the TV soaps. He sign up to my charade enthusiastically and insists: "Write, write me a letter to them" – he doubles up in laughter.

Maurice carries in a mouldy plastic bag a few fading and creased photographs of himself before. He is surrounded with minimally-attired knockout adolescent girls. These may be the "escorts". He confesses to wedding three of them and to fathering a brood.

I notice a sad-eyed kid, sprawled on a sofa, gaping at the camera. It's unmistakable: a tiny Maurice. You also can't misjudge the expression in Maurice's single, dewy, eyeball.

But Maurice the Cyclops never cries. His vising headaches merely reduce him to reclining on his rusty metal bed, turning his back to us, pretending to be slumbering. His shoulders quaver, yet we never dare approach him.

"All my women betrayed me" – he tells me every morning, awakened by the screaming wardens. I wonder what he dreams of that makes him reiterate so often.

"The minute I entered the pen, they strayed with another. That's why I divorced them, all three" – he elaborates.

Maurice places little trust in women. They hurt him so. "But they are so beautiful!" – he utters wistfully, as he measures a new pair of jeans he bought in his last vacation. They are too loose. I tell him. He spends the remainder of the evening refitting them and adding holes and buckles to his belts.

"How is it now?" – he anxiously enquires of no one in particular.

"Much better, Maurice" – I reassure him.

At night, when no one sees, he changes the soggy patch covering his missing eye. It's nothing but a gauze and two adhesive bandages, plastered directly over the shrivelled, murky hole that's left of the glistening, jocular eye in Maurice's photos.

He is ashamed and doesn't want to nauseate us. Maurice has a developed aesthetic sense. He still remembers beauty and wants it in his life. But all he has right now is a dehydrated wrinkle above a hollow abyss in his skull. It's where he used to gaze at beauty from. But now it's dark. Only the muscles that surround it still react to absence. He mocks himself self-deprecatingly. There's nothing else to do without an eye, a leg, one's looks.

Maurice is suing the police. In his mind he has won and is already divvying up the reparations. He is going to buy a flat, a car, and then a girl. She is bound to adore him and they will live in happiness and wealth and many children and Maurice will grow with them. "This is my second childhood" – he hums along with a hit song on the radio. In such times, Maurice is no longer in jail but in the hereafter, in a world of warm and loving families.

"I spent fourteen years inside" – he confides – "My father says I am lucky to have been shot. Maybe this way I will settle down. Maybe I will have enough money not to work and only raise my children."

The offspring he has already had are held back by his women. The same females who do not visit him and force him to stagger on the steep hills of Haifa just to see his kids for an instant and give them gifts. Maurice saves

all his meager pay and uses it to buy his children presents and himself more clothes.

"Some girls make advances in the cab on the way back to jail" – he brags. "I tell them that I am doing time for burglaries and this turns them on. When I returned from my last vacation I met one girl, she fell for me, she asked me to sit next to her, she twisted her face like this" – Maurice demonstrates a yielding, kiss-ready, feminine mouth.

He can't believe his luck: "She is so beautiful" – he moans longingly. He thinks this can't be true, something must be wrong with the girl, that this may be a trap. She must be married – he freaks. "We are so miserable" – he sighs – "The minute we cross the gate, they go looking for someone else."

Maurice yearns for the olden days, ten years ago, when a woman was a woman and he was a proper man with eyes to look dames over and legs to chase them. Maurice isn't good at expressing pain. He prefers to measure shirts or to ask me to write him letters.

That evening, when I come back from the detail, I find Maurice parked on his bunk, his ailing leg impossibly extended, weighed down by a bulky orthopaedic shoe. He avoids me, dejected. And then:

"Vaknin" – he calls – "Come here, Vaknin."

I go and sit by him. At his request, I tie his laces: one cross, one over, and a butterfly. He shuts his eyes while people fuss around him. And now, the humiliation and the embarrassment – both mine and his. The intimate togetherness, a man, shoelaces, man, at dusk, a drafty room, in prison. The closest two can get – sometimes more than carnal. A kind of love.

"Vaknin, thank you" – he says, inspecting my endeavours critically – "Vaknin, what shall I do if someone answers my letters? What will happen then? I am afraid to post them, not to get a response. I only have a socket. My beautiful eye hasn't arrived yet. I am crippled, crippled..."

Maurice breaks into a sob and I move closer and hug him and nestle him and wait for him to calm down.

But he does not. He is devoured by weeping. He crumbles in my arms, the tears engulfing both his eyes, ungluing the adhesive bandages and loosening the gauze. It falls. His triangular rib cage trembles, his inert leg twitches, and his absent eye, and all his offspring that are strewn across the city weep through him and the long years and his father, who is happy he was shot and the wall, the only witness to the anguished nights of Maurice.

And I weep with him. I, too, weep with him. Together.

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Harmony

by Sam Vaknin

On the phone, hushed voices, in our bedroom, late afternoon, Noa declines an offer to meet with her lover. I stand in the corridor, book in hand, listening intently, refusing to believe.

Her side of the conversation consists of a half-hearted demurral balanced by a lot of hopeful incredulity. How do you know the key will be under the rug - she questions her interlocutor - and how can you be sure they won't be at home?

This is how this phone conversation proceeds and Noa can see a penumbral Sam projected by the hallway lighting and then she can see me entering the room and looking at her, dumbfounded. She casts a glance my way and ignores me, continues the exchange as though nothing entered her field of vision.

I tell her: "Disconnect, Noa, now!". She goes on talking and my voice turns harsher and echoes through this vacuous room. I approach and extend an infuriated hand towards the phone's cradle. Now Noa apologizes hastily and hangs up.

Ricocheting verbal shrapnel, sentences unuttered, tension. We look away, she at the phone, I at my tiptoed feet. Noa suddenly grins but it is sheer embarrassment. We can't believe that this is happening to us, to our togetherness.

Her smirk ignites my rage, as was to be expected. Perhaps that's what she wants. Maybe this is her way of making certain she got punished, of guaranteeing attention long denied her, even if only to be chastised as evil and corrupt. Anything but this months-long absence, I and my book, sprawled on the leather couch, turning a barbered nape and taciturn back to her.

So, here it comes: attention, rage, envy. She is almost content. It is evident in the way she lowers her lashes, slumped on our marital twin bed, no intention to sit up, as though inviting me to her, making love to him and me simultaneously: today with me here and tomorrow with him on the phone, or vice versa.

I am curiously unfazed now. I am cold-blooded and matter-of-fact. I weigh and analyze. I survey all the options as they invitingly spread their dilemma horns. I inspect them with the indifference of a veteran client in

an overpriced brothel. I am acquainted with the merchandise, no novelty here, it's all the same old nudity. The perforated lampshade swings pendularly, set in motion by a now forgotten hand gesture. It rations light, once to myself and once to her, our faces yellow-flickered strainers.

Noa rises and I tell her to follow me into the living room. She obeys speechlessly. When she passes me in the narrow corridor, I don't give way and I rub against her agitated softness. I can smell her hair, the sex that wafts into my nostrils like a dare.

We sit in our living room. It is a chilly quadrangle, strewn with blinking appliances, bisected by a massive glass table-top that rests on four perfected marble tits. The glass slab mirrors us, distorted, our reflections melt into each other. I cross-examine her. I want the details.

Full frontal nakedness? Did he penetrate her? Did she give head? His hands on both her breasts? How did he taste?

She is patient, not mutinous. She says she hoped I will find out. She thought she could have both, the lover and myself. Yes. Permanently, as a way of life, but it didn't work out. And all this time I am panicking: God, this is real, this is Noa and this is me and an evening and we are at our home and this has happened so unpredictable and no way out. Like a pre-mortem trepidation.

Now what shall we do? asks Noa and the question hangs midair. We peruse every aspect of this query. It is crystalline and glitters, you can't mistake its polish. It is untouchable, unreachable. Like a heavy stone on a distant star from which there's no return.

I listen to my voice. It's icy and I am stunned. It's decisive. My self-control impresses me.

I say: Let's separate for a year and then we'll see. Rent a small apartment, do as you please and in twelve months let's see if you still want me and if I still want you, if we are still emotionally available.

Noa wails vociferously. She makes no attempt to hide the tears. She sits up, a veritable Alice in horrorland: golden curls adorn her round shoulders, her face disproportionately large, she has the hands and feet of children, that's the way I see her. That's the way I always want to see her.

Her lamentation startles me. I realize that she is crying for me too, perhaps mostly on my behalf. I cannot join her.

I soothe: Look, no single side is guilty. I have neglected you and our relationship, I let them fester and this is the result. This situation is of both our making.

She is relieved. She glances at me with gratitude. I ask her if she would like some red wine and she affirms enthusiastically as though we just found the solution and there it is, chilling in our refrigerator and we didn't appreciate it. So, I walk slowly, extract the bottle that I placed there in another universe, uncork it and pour into potbellied glasses. The lacey

foam subsides into the inky liquid. I bring this hue to Noa to consume. I click my tongue delighted at the taste.

Noa discusses details. What kind of apartment, where, how will she pay for it. She gets carried away, describing the interior decoration. I sip the wine strictly and not a word but I cannot look away from her exuberant eyes, intermittently flaring and decaying. She grows silent and swirls the fluid gently in her glass. She gazes into it as though trying to decipher the gory sediments left by the frothy drink. And then she sobs again.

She tells me that she loves me. She doesn't know what to do. She can't believe that she found herself in these circumstances. She no longer recognizes herself. What to do, she repeats her mantra, but this time I am not playing along, I am not her father after all. I feel as aghast and awkward as she does.

I stand up and stretch my bones. This is the kind of silence that breeds decisions. Not tense, just a break for data processing, like the dead moments when a floppy whirrs and the hard disk answers.

Noa changes her posture. I contemplate her body and wonder what it knew and not with me. A foot flashes, she bends and a swathe of milky breast, a nipple, his hand between her thighs.

I feel nothing, not even pain or fury. But I sense the distant echoes of a remote battle, behind the fortified hilltops of my self. It will arrive, this ruinous war, it will exact the price. Like everything else in life, it is only a matter of time.

I repeat to Noa her choice. She can remain here and we will try together, she can depart and we will separate, one year alone, maybe it's better that way. Maybe I am her undoing. And I keep reiterating silently: Noa, please ignore these monstrous alternatives offered by an alien, a stranger, not me. I love you. I love Noa. Throughout I want to hug her and make my love in her, but I just sit there, stony-faced, a scientist sifting through the formulas for a particularly complex experiment.

Now Noa is quiet, still rocked from time to time by mournful tremors, her fingers flutter and combine, a leg swings across the wide-brimmed, tattered arm of our sofa. She regards me tenderly.

I pour more wine. The halogen lights are blinding. We are so close, Noa and I, up there in the large screen of our TV. But really we are divided by glass and marble.

Noa takes her wine and toys with it. Suddenly she lays it down and bursts into bitter, convulsive whimpers, face buried in both hands, shoulders unruly.

"I can't leave you" - she sucks the words out of the thinning air - "I love you so. You are a wizard and I am hypnotized. I am staying here with you. Oh, let's try again!"

I let the words sink in. A rainbow ricochets from the glasses to the table. The light is piercing and in it I witness Noa making love. Like an unwanted child, this deed is with us, like an accident. Only it left me quadriplegic, breathless for all eternity, long after Noa is gone, and she will be gone. I now know that this, too, is only a matter of time.

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Blind Date

by Sam Vaknin

They said to me: "Meeting girls requires effort. If you just sit at home and don't try to mingle, they won't come to you, you know! You got to get out more."

So, I got out more and made an effort.

I work as a consultant to small enterprises and desperate entrepreneurs, a lonely kind of living, not the type of job teeming with feminine prospects. I wake up every morning, advise my clients, return in the afternoon to a flickering microwave oven. Some television and a tachycardiac awakening in alien surroundings, my tenebrous living room and the chill. Then, soiled underwear, I sink into my unkempt bed and doze off, drooling thick saliva diagrams over sheets and crumpled pillow, like the two-dimensional rendition of a layered archeological excavation. Come morning, I sniff my art and recoil, only to be captivated again by its monotonous aesthetics.

Again the morning race abreast the crowded bus. I contort myself to glance through the driver's expansive windshield: Am I there yet? Did I arrive? I have customers everywhere, an ostensibly desirable state of affairs. I climb stairs and wonder: Maybe this time? They are bound to have a secretary, aren't they? Perhaps even a woman business partner, or an accountant!

They said to me: "There are all kinds of classes, why don't you register, it would be worth your while, these are the best places to pick up girls." But I do not. I just sit at home, anticipating. It is inconceivable that this deafening silence goes unheard, that my distress is not discernible, trapped though it may be between these walls.

And, still, this solitude.

Noon time, I boil some tea and lubricate a frying-pan with margarine, carefully held amidst its greasy wrappings. I empty the contents of three shattered eggs onto the seething outcome. A woman could have done all that, I know. What is a woman?

A naked foot, a thigh, waving its way into an ankle.

Her breasts, of course. I hallucinate them with a residual and diminishing ferocity. I give up and masturbate.

Evening time, I visit with my friends some neutral places, where we do not compete for female preference, nor are we graded for our attractiveness

(or lack of it). Still, I resent their ability to dictate my choice of venues. Such indignation can easily fester into hatred and thence mutate into a sick haughtiness that says: They are powerless over me, I am resistant to their charms, truly, I do not need them at all.

One night I went on a blind date. I invested 49 shekels in a 9 words classified ad in a widely circulated rag. I wrote: "Blind man looking for blind woman for blind date" and my PO Box. Inevitably, I received a heap of Braille letters from the truly sightless. I briefly considered their cloistered seclusion, locked in their private darkness with their awkward typewriters, etching the regular protrusions of their pain into the thickest paper. I didn't respond to a single one of them, of course. They failed the test of deciphering my ad. Besides, I don't read or write Braille. Nor am I blind, I am merely lonely.

Some letters indicated a modicum of understanding of my situation. All manner of sensitive women who reacted with undisguised arousal to my veiled challenge. They desperately clung with manicured nails to the vestige of a hope that I may choose them from among the hundreds and the thousands of respondents. I could feel the effort that went into the razored folding of the paper, experience the panic in the curlicued letters.

At the end, I did pick one. I sat there, ranking them by traits that I deemed of indispensable importance as far as I am concerned. I scored them with meticulous objectivity on a scale of 1 to 10, added the points each had received and came up with Jezebel (9 points in all). Unusual name - nay, unforgettable. At any rate, with the Bible on her side, she struck me as a safe bet. Besides, I consoled myself, what could go wrong with such a name?

Partly to find out, I left my voice in her answering machine. Her message served only to enhance my interest. She sounded like a femme fatale, the kind that makes trouble merely by momentarily flashing the snowy and wrinkled confluence of her armpits and her breasts. That's how she sounded, like lots of smoke and lots of mayhem, or like an alcoholic, I wasn't really sure. But I sure wanted to be. So, I picked up the receiver and there she was, at the other end of the optic fiber, at the speed of the focused light that bonded us in real time. Well, almost.

The pleasantries that we exchanged were starkly contradicted by the hoarseness of her voice. We argued half-heartedly about the venue of our first encounter, nothing serious and she graciously succumbed, registering a point in her favor. Already I am in debt and we haven't even met.

I decided to be me and put on a T-shirt, the taut promise of virginal flesh with hints of silky and occult hair. A T-shirt is kind of an ad proclaiming: this is what I am like under my scant clothing, it may be worth your while to undress me. With this attire I attended our first assignation. And with

summer footwear showing only the merest intimations of tiny, sculpted toes. Oil-slicked mane, part shaven stubble and I was ready.

In the fashionable cafe, no one reproached me for my sartorial transgressions. I leaned my back on the humungous glass entrance. It provided for a perfect observation post. I liked to pose as a Mossad agent, or something equally intoxicating, now embroiled in the mission of a lifetime, adhering to the regulations and procedures that will extricate me from this inadvertent hell. Real spies probably hate all these well-rehearsed, automatic, wearily familiar motions. So what? Do they improvise instead? Could be. I, not being a veritable spook (people's counterfactual perceptions notwithstanding), simply wouldn't know. But my posture sometimes misleads. Especially the girls. Nothing explicit, mind you: an imperceptible tilt of the head with an almost-wink will do.

So, now I stood like that, in my secret agent posture, scanning the place through my nearly computerized eyes (imposing a conjured digital square rangefinder on my field of vision). I couldn't see her. Couples and whole families took over the entire space, tables possessed by businessmen in the throes of lively arguments coupled with intimidating body language.

Small wonder she joined me from behind. If she were really a ravishing Russian spy she could have easily stabbed me in the back, for instance, or popped me with a silenced gun, or wasted me with a weapon I never even heard of.

What she did say stunned me so that I neglected to notice her looks. She uttered: "I also play this game sometimes".

I mumbled back "What game?" because I was shocked and I didn't dare to believe it. Well, alright, she didn't get it one hundred percent. She expounded: "Cops in pursuit of dangerous criminals" and that was a miss, as I was playacting an intelligence officer, matching wits with foreign spies, each of us fighting for a cause we believe to be both good and decent. But it was still nice that she noticed the make-belief at all and, coming to think about it, cops and robbers was not that far from rival espionage rings.

So I took it as an impressive omen. My fucking brain that doesn't let go of me even when I climax, revved into instant action. I was amazed at the extent of information buried in her impoverished six-words sentence. Cops and dangerous criminals inhabit a hostile universe of constant struggle, violence, and terror. This must be her world as well, I am a great believer in the revelatory nature of first utterances.

And what were my first words? Silence. I said zilch, nada, nothing. Having deconstructed her introductory syllables, I began to survey her, limb by limb. It goes without saying that she was perfect. Her single, dazzling pronouncement rendered me momentarily half-blind. No one - and I mean no one - ever offered me such a penetrating insight, definitely

not in the first few seconds we have met. Relationships with most people develop unexpectedly: they start off wearily. This anticipatory tediousness causes separation and excites the energies of dedicated love that the fear of loss provokes. Where are these passions when needed to prevent the breakup in the first place? I moved to contemplate her feet.

Nothing interests me in a woman more than her feet. Jezebel (it was she, I presume, even though we weren't formally introduced yet) rested with perfect equipoise and let me scrutinize her semi-nude feet at length. She wasn't embarrassed at all by the fact that we were blocking the only entrance and were being pestered and shoved by people who then apologize reproachfully. She didn't show the slightest inclination to shuffle one millimeter from her obstructive spot until I am done with my inspection.

She was wearing thongs of Japanese delicacy. Her curvaceous, pearly feet broke out of this nearly emblematic confinement, voluptuously maddening. I could fall in love with a woman just for her feet and Jezebel had a perfect pair: not too mannish and not too infantile.

When I recovered, I looked her in the face and she smiled thinly but not haughtily, her eyes rising with her eyebrows firmly affixed and this, too, was a novelty because usually it is the other way around with eyes and eyebrows. This subtle pantomime was more expressive than any question and I motioned expansively and followed her onto a vacated table for two.

We were seated (I offered her the chair) and she grinned once more. I was dazed by the vocabulary of her smiles. She liked my chivalry, but I expected it. Women's lib and all that jazz aside, they love it when we evince our servitude. I let a ripple of hostility sweep over me and then it's gone.

"I am Jezebel" - she said and her voice had qualities obscured by telephony. It was deep, nearly masculine, and, usually, I didn't find such voices appealing in the least, but hers I loved. It occurred to me with startling immediacy that - for a first date which haven't yet begun - I fancied too many of her qualities. I also found her face to be exquisite and I decided to tell her that, what have I got to lose. In general, I settle on a stream of consciousness. I articulate the first things that come into my mind. I am tired of the masquerade of "Listen, I am the catch of a lifetime, successful, perfect, smart and so on". I told her that as well.

She threw back her head (where did this mane come from?) and chuckled wholeheartedly. And when I say "wholeheartedly" I mean that everyone must have heard her, the way people were gaping at us. It filled my heart with pride that I can make such a gorgeous girl laugh and I was reminded of studies that prove that a sense of humor is an important part of interpersonal attraction.

"I love the texture of your skin" - she blurted, staring unabashedly at my shoulders and how they slope away, in gentle folds, into my armpits. I felt self-conscious and I thought to myself that I wished the conversation, if there were to be any, would be a trifle more cerebral.

"You want to talk" - she sighed and leaned back, making me aware for the first time of the proximity she just abandoned - "What do you want to talk about?"

I glared at her, desperately recalling everything I ever read about mind-reading and telepathy. Either my face is see-through translucent or she was a witch. Her fiery hair made the latter option by far the more probable. I didn't want to consider the third possibility: that she had been on many blind dates and that all males react the same. And I mean the exact same way.

"You study anything?" - I enquired and she made a show of unclasping a black purse, pulling out a box of cigarettes, extracting one, diving for a lighter, and failing to make it work. Finally, her cigarette ablaze, she exhaled a measured puff of smoke. She weighed my query for awhile and then responded:

"Depends what you mean. I learn all the time, even in this meeting."

I tried to counter when, suddenly, she violently crushed the butt in the fancy metal ashtray.

She glowered, lids lowered, at the smoldering remnants until they embered and then looked at me again. I could literally see the clash of various considerations in her mind, her indecision.

"Look,"- she declared- "I am a great fan of clicking and chemistry. I even believe in love at first sight. What about you?"

I told her that I, too, am a believer in the power of biology. She swept aside my intellectualization impatiently: "What does it matter, why it exists as long as it does!" We agreed on that.

"So, I would say that in our case, it is love at first sight" - she summed flatly, as though she were reporting the outcome of an inordinately complex chess match. As though this "fact" had equal standing with all others (for instance, with the fact that we have ordered nothing to eat or drink).

It all became so clear. Some sentences possess the power to rearrange reality and abruptly illuminate the scene. You see things you haven't known even existed. They call it "explanatory power" in philosophy of science. Her words had such an effect on me. Hitherto, it has all been so opaque, the way I felt and how I regarded various parts of this tryst.

But when I examined the sentence "I am in love", it shed light all around. I have a predilection towards "key phrases", the kind that, not unlike some magic spells, capture the entire world in its embryonic state.

I am in love. Yes, this could serve as a sufficient explanation for what was happening between us and inside me. But, was this also a necessary one? In other words: couldn't there be another interpretation that arranged the universe so that it acquired meaning, cause, and a goal - without resorting to the assumption that I am enamored of her?

An organizing principle, this is what I really needed urgently - either this, or an all-consuming infatuation, the kind that Jezebel was clearly offering by employing plural pronouns. She didn't say: Look, you are in love and that is why you take in reality the way you do. No. She said: "In our case, it is love at first sight." In our case. Evidently, she found this choice of words equally enlightening.

So what can one do with a girl who confides in you this way? We rose from the table without ordering and with no bill to pay. I left a crumpled note to the baffled waitress and we went to my place to fuck.

In the silence after (the clocks ticking louder than usual), Jezebel lit a smoke and so did I. It had the hallmarks of a dead end because fucking is supposed to be the culmination, not the opening act. What can two people do after sex that is as potent and as telling?

They cohabit, I assume. Time is as powerful as coitus. So, I offered and she accepted and she bent towards me, her breasts dangling but firm, pressed into my flaccid chest, and butterfly-kissed my eyelids, licking my bushy eyebrows and the bridge of my prominent nose into the bargain. That was her way of saying "I do."

We cohabited. We transformed our bodies into dual playgrounds, each day discovering new installations. Our brains fused and rarely did I have to complete my sentences. Or hers. We strolled, hands clasped, rubbing shoulders, thighs, and hips on every opportunity.

I thought this must be happiness and most probably it was. We did everything together but knew how to feel alone. We shared the same tastes and generally agreed about most issues. We took old-fashioned care of each other when we were ill and did the same when we were not. She, for instance, surprised me with my favorite flavored teas in the most unexpected moments and it felt like receiving a gift on a non-birthday. I couldn't see enough of her - though, as time passed, I loved her more like one does one's childhood books and intimate, time-worn furnishings. I believe that she reciprocated, that's what her eyes communicated when we made love.

Perhaps I should not have been so taken aback when she announced that she is leaving, that she has someone else. Perhaps I really wasn't. I think that the problem was less the element of surprise than the all-pervading hurt.

I sat on our crumbling leather loveseat, a puppet without its master, the strings torn from my skin, bleeding their way out. I cried a lot and begged,

but, all that time, I knew that this is leading nowhere, that it is only a question of time, and not a lot of it.

I was like a cancer patient whose nights are numbered. I would wake up and gaze at her asleep for hours. I knew she was making it with someone else and I replayed their torrid copulations over and over again. Her part was easy to imagine. I knew what she liked done and I saw no reason why he would not oblige, if only to make her entire edifice moan and purr. Whenever I think of things I did or got wrong, I shut tight my eyes and pucker my face. Sometimes I whistle or repeat a mantra or say something in Nazi. That's how I exorcise my shame and guilt. I did it often now.

Solitude again. It is far more onerous after togetherness. Coming to think of it: why was it so easy being alone before? Isn't it strange? Togetherness probably has an elusive component that is addictive. Loneliness feels like the panic of a patient whose medication ran out and there is no way of obtaining more or substitutes. Every object and every sound and music and the occasional street cry are like handles attached to pain-stuffed drawers. I drowned in their content.

My friends embarked on another round. I started to feel like Job. They said: "Listen, if you don't circulate and meet girls ... They won't just come here, you know! You've got to go the extra mile, literally and figuratively. You've got to make an effort if you don't want to be lonely!"

When they departed, I boiled some tea and, admittedly, it didn't taste the way it did before. There is some ingredient in loving hands that alters the very attributes of the world. But it was still tea and it was sweetened with low-fat milk. I drank it hesitantly at first and then more avidly and then gulped it down voraciously. When I was done, I wiped my lips with upturned hand and inspected with mild interest the moistened outcome. It reminded me of a woman.

I think I already knew the answer. Thus, that lonely night with a flaming sword which turned every way inside my guts, I recognized my truth. I went over to the panoramic view torn in the living room of this once-cohabited apartment. I looked down at the grayish, indecisively truncated street. All manner of figures crossed it, clad in T-shirts and denims. Fossilized in pain, they were beyond the reach of even the most loving and well-meaning.

And this is precisely what I came to understand: that love is no insurance policy. It's not even a promise. It can't predict a single forward move. Salvation is only one of many options, not the inevitable outcome. This realization did not make me happier, it really didn't. But it sure made me stronger.

I dimmed the piercing halogen light, placed a Brahms in the DVD player, sprawled on our tattered leather armchair, letting its coolness penetrate me. Eyes shut, I counted the times I listened to this oeuvre. I

soothed myself: "Listen, you have known yourself for many years now. You are an OK guy, all considered. Don't you think we are going to make it?"

And I added: "Actually, why involve others in this love affair between me and myself? Entre-nous, who will love me like I do. who will spoil me unconditionally and with whom can I be so open? And if these are not the determinants and dimensions of true love, what are?"

The more I contemplated this, the more I knew I hit upon the quintessence, I stumbled across the right decision, I faced incomparable attachment.

I hugged my shoulders with my own, dry, warm hands and tilting my head to one side, I kissed and gently bit one rounded hill and then another in tender foreplay.

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Nothing's Happening at Home

By Sam Vaknin

Mother tells me not to say anything at school about what is happening at home. Nothing is happening at home. Come morning, I wake up from my restless sleep and either I wetted my bed or I didn't. If I did, mother silently packs off my soaked pajamas and the damp sheets, casting a harsh glance at the black stain that seeps into the bed's upholstery. The house already reeks and she opens the shutters and lays the linen on the window panes, half out and the dry half in.

I get dressed and brush my teeth. I stare at my feet that are the shape of irons and conceal them, standing on one naked foot and then another, enthralled by their curvaceous obesity. The white paste and my saliva swirl in my mouth and drip on my undershirt in odoriferous stripes. I have bad breath but I don't know it yet. Nir will tell me and then I will. I frown and pull the polluted garment away, as though I could undress horizontally instead of vertically, hands stretched upwards. It turns dark for a moment and scary so I scream. And this is how I earn today's first slap. Mother dumps the soiled underthings in the gaping laundry pale. Her eyes are desperate. I am not a successful kid. I am ugly and immature and I have an eggplant nose ("berengena" in Ladino). I rub my hurting cheek and put on the sky blue school uniform shirt and trousers. I don't know how to tie my shoelaces. Instead of slender butterflies I get knotted caterpillars, bound larva, repulsive insects with two plastic tipped antennae. My mother is taking care of my small sister. I wait patiently. She sighs and places the baby on the bed. She steps towards me and I recoil because I don't know how mad I made her. I am not sure what it's going to be this time. Sometimes she just groans and ties the laces with one incisive motion but at other times she pinches me real hard and we are both mum and my blood streams down to her nip until the place acquires shades of black, and blue and deep purple. She doesn't have to tell me to roll down my sleeves. I do it. The dirty laundry of this family stays at home. Our secrets are ours and no one else's. Sometimes I imagine us like a fortress and the enemy would kill to learn all kinds of things about us but we are not going to let it, no way. We will protect each other and we will hold them back.

On the days that mother washes the house, I withdraw to a corner and I imagine a mighty army, shooting arrows from all kinds of cracks and

casements and I see a hero and he is fighting empty-handed in a variety of martial arts and he wins. Cooped up in an angle, the dirty water churning around me, rivulets of our effluence, revolting strands of hair and nail clippings. Then she spreads a tattered blanket in the tiny balcony and turns on the radio and we listen to the Program for the Mother and Child, Listen now you lovely kids, our program is complete and she brings me a big bowl of fruits and I eat them and feed my sister, too.

When the shoelaces business is over, I turn my back to her and await the heft of my schoolbag and I exit without saying goodbye or so long or anything. She yells after me to be careful how I cross the street, there are cars, and to be wary of children, don't let them beat you. Once, a stranger lifted me on his shoulders and asked me to read aloud the names on the mailboxes. We went through many buildings, him and me. He told me that he was looking for some family. When I returned home, they shouted at me something awful and warned me not to associate with strangers because they are dangerous, this is a fortress and we are in it. Even our extended family don't visit. Mother and father don't like it when they do. They set a table with all kinds of alcoholic drinks and non-alcoholic beverages that we, the children are allowed to consume but mother's eyes follow everyone to see if they have touched anything and she doesn't like at all the mess they make, these guests.

I don't pee at school because the urinals are not clean or something. I don't remember why, I just know not to pee. Mother tells me not to hold back, it isn't healthy but I abstain on purpose. I want to pee at home. When I come back, mother doesn't let me visit the restroom to get sorted out. That's how we call it, "sorted out". It's a word the teacher Mina taught us, she said that it is not nice to pee, better to get sorted out. Mother adores this word and it became compulsory, because we are not allowed to use foul language. So I ask permission to get sorted out and mother takes a broom to me and beats me forcefully on the back and all the neighbors stand at the entrance door and watch and I pee on myself and on the floor is this large yellow puddle in which I stand. Mummy's broom gets all wet and the neighbors laugh and mother sends me away to change my clothes, perhaps now I will learn not to hold back at school. She takes down my trousers and I am exposed to the jeering crowd, drenched and naked. It isn't a good day, this one. I read all evening and I read at night and I read during the morning. I read a lot throughout this not so good day.

Mother could have been a famous author or an important actress but instead she had us and did not become one. She became a housewife. There is a lot of sadness and a lot of anger when she tells us that and also how once she appeared in a play as Pook the naughty dwarf and everyone complimented her and urged her to join a professional troupe. She couldn't do it because she was working in a shoe store on Mount Carmel to support

her father and her mother who didn't love her at all because she was boyish. She wore her hair like a boy and dressed like a boy and was as daring as a boy and she gulped huge quantities of salty soup and three loaves of bread when she came back from work at the shop owned by the Yekkes (German-Jews) whom she admired. When I was born, the radio broadcast the proceedings of the Eichmann trial and she called me "My Little Eichmann" but that was only in jest. These Yekkes with their order and efficiency and table manners and how she studied German and they all admired her in return. And now this: a wailing baby and the dripping bed sheets of her first born (you are not a child anymore!) already six years old and must grow up and her fingernails gouging my veins on the inside of my arm and all my blood rushing towards her and staining and she stares down at her hand, a glimmer in her eyes wide open and I slowly extract my arm from her grasp and she does not resist it. She just sighs and brings some stinging violet iodine and smears it on the lacerations. After some time they scar and all that remain are pale and elongated mother traces.

So now I am reading and am in all my imaginary kingdoms and writing horror poems that mother finds and stashes on a towering cupboard to make me stop it because it's sick and she doesn't want to see it again. She tears the books I borrow from the public library and flings them out of the concrete bars that frame our laundry room where we also dine on a tiny wooden table. Through these bars she tears my realms apart and down to the shriveling grass and I leave everything and gallop downstairs because I am afraid that by the time I get to my shredded books someone will abscond with them or the wind will scatter them or the rain. I find them prostrate and wounded and I salve them with my spit to heal them like mother's purple iodine. I think that maybe my saliva will glue them back thick as it is but they remain the same, only now their torn pages are also damp. Back at home father and I sellotape the ruptured leaves and when I go to the library, I say all kinds of lies or put on an innocent face so that the librarian Shula will not flip through it and see our shoddy handicraft, my father's and my own, even though he has golden hands and fixes everything at home. But I keep reading, sometimes five whole books a day. I am completely uninterested in their content. I don't read even one of them to its end, skip numerous paragraphs, don't even finish thrillers or mysteries. Just scan the pages, dimly aware of the words and father says to mother when she curses me under her breath, what do you want from him, you don't understand him at all and who can, he doesn't belong to us, he is from another planet. I weep when I hear these words, my silent tears, not the cries I give out when I am beaten and not the self-indulgent whimpering and see how ugly you are when you are like that. No, this is a true release between me and my pillow and I feel then how poor they are and how much I should pity them and not the other way around, because I am not

from this world and I don't belong and they have to raise me all the same. Even though they are proud of me because I am a star pupil and give the keynote addresses in all the school and municipal events and declare open and closed all the ceremonies and from a tender age I had the voice of a radio announcer and am a prodigy with a bright future. Mother herself tells me that when we sit around the table and she looks my age she is so young and with a boyish haircut and pink, taut skin on her high cheekbones. She says that she is proud of me but not to let it go to my head, but there is a change in her attitude towards me, like a new fear, like I am out of the fortress now, unpredictable, from another world and don't belong.

She used to tell us about Gamliel the Sage and his adventures that always had an object lesson with his scrawny and miserable goat and his stupid neighbors that he always tricked and we would beg, mother mother, more and she graciously consented and those were afternoons of magic and I felt no need to read, only to listen to the stories of the Sage and his donkey and his son and his goat and to sip from that sweetened peach-flavored drink she made us.

But then she would say enough and ask who touched the refrigerator and we would say not we but she knew. She always pointed at us and said that we had touched the refrigerator and we know we mustn't and how her life is being ruined by the need to clean after us and then the beatings, the beatings. All our body.

In the middle of the apartment we have a floor-to-ceiling metal divider. Father welded it together from metal leaves and metal vines and stuck a small aquarium full of teeny fish and water and a plastic diver that gives off bubbles and all kinds of shells and fine ground sand. Every morning, father gets up and spreads smelly aquarium food with callused fingers over the bubble-troubled water, rusty flakes that sink like feathers straight into the gaping jaws of the frenetic fishes. Every week one of them would remain stuck at the bottom or float and the others would snap at it and we know it is dead and it is bloated too. At night, I sleep across from this divider, on the side that mother forbids to enter during the day and the flickering light emitted by the electric all souls candle illuminates the diver and the inky water and his loneliness and the bubbles and everything and I watch it all until I fall asleep. Come morning, the room beyond the divider is off-limits, only mother is scrubbing and carefully dusting the nightly build-up off the expensive Formica furniture. I am the only one who sleeps there at night, facing the television set. Even guests are asked to watch this black-and-white wonder from the outside. Until my bedtime, I sit overlooking them all but don't take my socks off not to show my feet like irons and I hope not to wet the sheets in front of everyone, anything but that. Mother passes cookies to old Monsieur Yossef from Turkey who talks incessantly. And so I doze off amidst the sounds of the TV and of

Monsieur Yossef. I have bad dreams and listen to mother and father arguing I will pack my suitcases and leave you all tomorrow, feel free, mother says, feel free to go. Tomorrow he doesn't. He gets up at the middle of the night to go to work and before he departs he straightens our blankets and I think that maybe he kisses my cheek or forehead somehow, otherwise how did his stubble scrape me it must have been a kiss.

The next day father brings me books from the library of the Union of Construction Workers in Haifa that I never visit. I do go with him to attend lectures at the Union and I ask the lecturers smart questions and everyone is amazed and so is dad. He inflates the way he always does when he is proud of me. Now in the book he brought me there is a story about a king and clothes and a kid who has the guts to cry even though it is the monarch and everything: "The King is Naked". I read it a couple of times like I don't believe that some kid will shout such a thing about the king and what happened to him afterwards, surely he was scratched and pinched at least to death. I contemplate his iron-like feet, petite and rosy when he ascends to the gallows and how his head rolls sprinkling gore all over the crowd but everything is frozen and no one cheers like in the movies about the French revolution. Everyone gapes at this kid's lips through which he said that the King is Naked. There is something empowering and hopeful in this, as though a goodhearted old fellow with long hair bends over me because he notices that I am small and that I am bleeding profusely from my arms and he gives me this magic spell, this faith.

I open my eyes and I see that mother has a kerchief on her head, like she always wears when she is dusting. She notices my stare but she sings boisterously and I know that I am unnerving her by watching her do her chores. I know that soon she will mete out what a child like me deserves.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Narcissistic and psychopathic parents and their children - click on the links:

<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/narcissisticabuse/message/4727>

Genetics and Personality Disorders

<http://samvak.tripod.com/personalitydisorders27.html>

The Genetic Underpinnings of Narcissism

<http://samvak.tripod.com/journal43.html>

Narcissism at a Glance

<http://samvak.tripod.com/narcissismglance.html>

How Can I Save My Child from the Narcissist or Psychopath?

<http://samvak.tripod.com/4.html>

Narcissistic Parents

<http://samvak.tripod.com/faq5.html>

The Narcissist's Dead Parents

<http://samvak.tripod.com/faq54.html>

Parenting - The Irrational Vocation

<http://samvak.tripod.com/parent.html>

The Narcissist's Mother

<http://samvak.tripod.com/faq64.html>

The Prodigy as Narcissistic Injury

<http://samvak.tripod.com/journal89.html>

Leveraging the Children

<http://samvak.tripod.com/abuse12.html>

Tell Your Children the Truth

<http://samvak.tripod.com/abuse13.html>

The Narcissist and His Family

<http://samvak.tripod.com/faq22.html>

The Cult of the Narcissist

<http://samvak.tripod.com/journal79.html>

Narcissist, Beware the Children

<http://samvak.tripod.com/journal36.html>

The Narcissist as Eternal Child

<http://samvak.tripod.com/journal92.html>

The Inverted Narcissist

<http://samvak.tripod.com/faq66.html>

Intimacy and Abuse

<http://samvak.tripod.com/intimacyabuse.html>

The Narcissist is Looking for a Family

<http://samvak.tripod.com/journal5.html>

Adolescent Narcissist

<http://samvak.tripod.com/case01.html>

Portrait of the Narcissist as a Young Man

<http://samvak.tripod.com/journal22.html>

The Delusional Way Out

<http://samvak.tripod.com/journal42.html>

The Development of the Narcissist

<http://samvak.tripod.com/faq25.html>

The Dual Role of the Narcissist's False Self

<http://samvak.tripod.com/faq48.html>

The Roots of Pedophilia

<http://samvak.tripod.com/pedophilia.html>

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

This part is meant only to provoke thoughts. It is not a substitute to independent thinking, criticism, and analysis.

Is Pathological narcissism a reaction to prolonged abuse and trauma in early childhood or early adolescence?

Is the source of the abuse or trauma immaterial? Could the perpetrators be parents, teachers, other adults, or peers?

Are pampering, smothering, spoiling, and "engulfing" the child also forms of abuse?

Read these:

<http://malignantselflove.tripod.com/narcissismglance.html>

<http://malignantselflove.tripod.com/journal42.html>

http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc/id/419

Is pathological narcissism genetic? Does it have genetic underpinnings?

<http://malignantselflove.tripod.com/journal43.html>

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Anton's Trap

The voice on the other end of the phone was sweaty. This is the kind of tremor that makes me want to hang up, curl among some smelly blankets, and dose off. I like skeletal tones, dry, brittle, decisively fatalistic. People who get straight to the point, my point, their point, our point. I gazed at the grimy receiver.

"Detective Escher?" - he sounded muffled, as though speaking through a coat.

I waited. He will come around.

"They say you are the best". This guy is positively dangerous.

"Can we meet?" I thought he'd never ask.

"The Valencia" - I said - "Eight o'clock. Be sharp. I won't wait around".

"Oh, I understand, I will be ...". I hung up on him and wiped my fingers in a used napkin. The "Valencia" was across the street. They served decent sandwiches and tolerable tea in worn silver mugs. I liked the place, it decomposed gracefully. It was a crisp evening, good for a walk. So, I walked.

By the time I got to the Valencia it was half past eight. I couldn't care less. I almost wished I had missed him, but had no such luck. He was there, fat fingers and all. Beady eyes glared at me accusingly, rolling in an avalanche of corpulence. His body looked disorganized,

like an afterthought. He got up, throttled by the effort and extended a fleshy hand which I ignored.

If he had shoulders, he would have shrugged them. Instead, he deflated into the protesting mock-leather love seat and said: "I never did this before. It is my first time". He startled me. His voice was as smothered face to face as it had been through the phone. I couldn't force myself to soothe him.

I rolled a cigarette and ordered beer and a corn beef sandwich. It was almost gone before my client revived and pushed a brand new envelope across the crooked Formica.

"It's all here" - he mumbled, shifting uneasily, spraying my food with perspiration - "The girl ..." - he left it hanging.

I scooped the envelope and lodged it in the inner pocket of my shabby coat. I could tell he wasn't too impressed. I gulped down some beer and came up for air. He said: "When do you plan on ...". He had this unnerving habit of dangling aborted sentences in mid-air.

I got up, nodded peremptorily, and walked away. He didn't follow me but I could feel his eyes spearing my back and I could sense his panic that, maybe, just maybe, he was had been wrong. It must have happened to him a lot, this pendular self-doubting.

2. The Judge

The envelope contained only a neatly folded piece of paper with a name scrawled across it with a blunt pencil. I almost turned around and shoved it back in his cascading face but then I remembered his stench and gave up.

Instead, I leaned against a lamppost and scrutinized the toppling letters. Then I stuffed the envelope in my back pocket and, for some reason felt like whistling. A new lede was like infatuation. spurts of adrenaline, colors sprouting, weightlessness, even the cacophony of the streets is music. In my mind, I kept rehearsing not to forget to get a warrant. I had the inclination to overlook red tape and constitutional niceties.

I glanced at my watch. It was too late for Jack and too early to return home. But I decided that an angry Jack is preferable to an empty tenement. I headed north, along the river. Jack lived uphill and I had to climb the winding road that led to his brass gate. Distant barks, rustling leaves, lights turned on and off in accelerating succession and there was Jack, holding the door ajar and glaring at me balefully.

"What do you want, Escher?"

"A warrant".

"At this time of night?"

I grinned: "The Law never rests."

He sighed and restrained his canine companion.

"Come in," - he muttered - "and tell me all about it."

I did.

3. The Girl

Jack escorted me, like in the good old days, when we were partners, before he went to night law school, before he became an attorney, then a judge, before he married one of his former clients, a fabulously wealthy, plastically-enhanced widow. The warrant, signed, was tucked safely in an inside compartment of his angora wool jacket. Jack was flabby, bloated, out of shape, an occluded front of grey under his suntanned skin betraying his fatigue. Up one knoll we climbed and up another until even I ran short of breath.

Her abode was well-worth the effort, though: a greenhouse dome, besieged by savage shrubbery, casting lances of aquamarine light at the purple sky.

Jack whistled and then coughed convulsively.

"Quite a sight" - I concurred.

But Jack's social nous far exceeded his aesthetic predilection. The occupant was on his mind, not the residence's optical diversions.

"Do you know who lives here?" - he enquired awhisper - "This is George Ashdown, the defense lawyer! I thought her name rang familiar!". He wouldn't want to infringe on the turf of a potential contributor to his campaign war chest, I assumed.

I shrugged and pressed the electric buzzer long and hard. The door opened almost instantaneously and a feminine silhouette emerged from the penumbral innards of the establishment.

"Can I help you?"

"I am Detective Escher," - I volunteered - "and this is Judge Bayou. Can we have a word with ..."

I fumbled in my pockets and straightened the crumpled note:

"Ashdown, Edna Ashdown."

"That would be me." - She eyed us warily: "What is it all about?"

"Police business." - I tried to sound minacious and, judging by Jack's recoil, made a splendid job of it. But, the girl was imperturbable:

"Can I see your badge, please?"

Having dispensed with the police procedural formalities, she ushered us in and offered us "something to drink." I declined and so did Jack as we took in her figure: emaciated, brittle, faded, and way younger than we thought. At her explicit invitation we sat down.

"Miss Ashdown," - I said - "is it true that you have witnessed a murder recently?"

She averted her eyes, but there was no alarm in them, only an overwhelming embarrassment at having been caught out acting real naughty: "Who says?"

Jack moved uneasily in his seat. I procrastinated. She maintained her sang-froid.

"An informant. Says you told him so."

She smiled and looked straight at me:

"I told many people, Detective Escher. It wasn't easy to succeed to make your acquaintance, you know."

I stared at her, befuddled. "I think I will have that drink now, ma'am. Orange juice, if it is no bother." - I finally offered - "If you were trying to attract the attention of the Law, why not simply stroll into the nearest police station and be done with it?"

"Oh, but I did!" - The whole thing appeared to amuse her beyond measure - "I did, but no one would listen to me, let alone believe me. They said that in the absence of a victim, there is no crime." - She giggled and then made a visible effort to control her mirth.

"Without a victim?" - It was Jack's turn to sound dumbfounded.

"A corpse, you know." - She elucidated patiently - "There's no corpse."

4. The Crime

"Why don't we start from the beginning." - I felt exasperated: "Who murdered whom?"

"My father killed my mother."

Jack shifted his position, subtly signaling me. I ignored him.

"Why? Why did he do that?"

The girl grinned incongruously: "He was double-timing her. He had an affair. With me."

Jack sounded as though he were choking on his ice cubes.

"When was it?"

She thought back: "Oh, two, three days ago. I haven't exited the house since then, you know."

"How did he kill her?"

"Detective Escher!" - Jack's voice was stern and reprimanding - "That's enough!". He turned towards my interlocutor and advised her avuncularly: "You will probably end up being a suspect in this case. Everything you say may be held against you in a court of law. I strongly advise you to have a lawyer present during this interrogation."

"Is this an interrogation?" - She sounded more mischievous than surprised. She fixed me with her gaze.

"An informal one." - I struggled to remain truthful.

She laughed, tilting her head and eyeing me, evidently entertained:

"You have a way with words, Detective Escher. Anyhow," - turning to Jack now - "I don't need, nor do I want a lawyer present. I know what I saw. I am here to help the Law, not to obstruct it. I want justice for my late mother."

Jack nodded helplessly, shrugged his padded shoulders, and sprawled on the chaise, his body language broadcasting defeat.

I took it from there:

"Back to basics. Where did he dump the body?"

She cringed.

"How did he kill her? Where did he bury her?" - I repeated, after a moment of unproductive silence.

She sighed and rose from her chair reluctantly:

"Come, I will show you."

"I thought you said there's no corpse!" - Jack interjected.

"There is none," - she responded off-handedly - "but my father is here, upstairs. He will confess. He will tell you everything."

5. Arrest

Her father didn't confess. On the contrary, he vehemently denied having committed any kind of infraction, let alone the alleged murder of his wife. He lashed out at his daughter, calling her a liar and accusing her of deliberate confabulation, all with the intention of framing him up.

"Why would she want to do that?" - Enquired Jack. He sat at the massive oak desk, facing the suspect: a diminutive, wizened, but charismatically imposing figure, clad in a silk gown that overflowed at his slippered feet. Bright blue eyes peered out from an etched network of suntanned wrinkles. a mane of striking white hair, brushed, Hitler-style, to one side.

"Because she hates me!".

Jack continued apace:

"Does she has a special reason to hate you to the point of potentially seeing you dead, if you are convicted of the murder of your wife?"

A decisive "Yes!" was followed by the unlikely tale that his wife is not dead, she left him many years ago and he doesn't know her whereabouts.

His daughter sniggered:

"You murdered her! I saw you do it!"

The father rose half way from his seat, his face contorted, but then thought better of it and subsided, emitting a rending sigh.

"Sir," - said Jack, his voice smooth and solicitous - "your daughter accuses her of having had a sexual liaison with her. Now, you don't have to answer any of our inquiries. You have not been arraigned for questioning, but you still may wish to have a lawyer present ..."

The father waived this caution away impatiently:

"Lies. Damn lies. She has been a liar ever since she could speak, my viper daughter."

He cast a curious glance her way and lowered his eyes, almost abashedly. His daughter grinned fiercely, tautly and then burst into tears. Amidst this awkward moment, her father whispered, almost inaudibly:

"I guess you have to take me in."

"Yes, we do, Sir," - muttered Jack and furtively looked my way.

The father pushed his ornamented chair back and stood up:

"Allow me just to change into something more suitable."

Jack left the room with the daughter in tow and, the father's shriveled body now clad in an impeccably ironed three piece suit, I produced the requisite

paraphernalia, handcuffs and all. He handed both hands, wrists upturned, and waited patiently as I clasped them.

"She is lying, you know. You would do well to ignore her."

I manhandled him towards the door:

"Not my job. Why don't we let the DA, judge, and jury decide that? George Ashdown, I arrest you for the first degree murder of your wife, Rachel Ashdown, nee Fortnam." I read him the Miranda warning.

He trembled and went quite as we descended the spiral staircase and joined Jack and the daughter, now attired in a hideous purple overcoat.

"Let's go!" - Said Jack and so we did.

6. The Trial

I will never forget that day, the time of her testimony, when my career ended. The morning was sleety and smoggy. The fluorescent-lit courtroom flickered eerily. The obese, perspiring judge, the restless jury, the stout bailiff gloomily shuffled feet and folded and unfolded arms. I sat at the prosecution table, having already testified at the early stage of this surrealistic spectacle.

"Your honor, can we approach the bench?"

The judge motioned them regally and both lead prosecutor and defense attorney rushed to the counter. A susurrous session ensued, at the end of which, the judge nodded his head gravely and wrote something

laboriously. The attorneys hesitated and then departed reluctantly. The judge summoned the bailiff in hushed tones and consorted with him conspiratorially.

"What's going on?" - I leaned towards the lead prosecutor. He glared at me: "You will soon find out, Detective Escher. You should have conducted your investigation more thoroughly, I am afraid."

"The mother? Is it the mother? Is she alive?"

"Far worse," - was his mysterious riposte.

The bailiff nodded enthusiastically, descended from the podium and began to drag the witness lectern to the farthest corner of the room. Panting, he rolled up his sleeves and placed two wooden chairs on the path between the two rows of spectators. He then concluded this manifestation of interior re-design by urging the prosecution and the defense team to switch their positions. The judge instructed one of the junior lawyers on the defense team to leave the room and wait for his re-entry in the damp and drafty corridor.

The judge exhausted his gavel trying to quell the inevitable murmurs:

"Quiet! Order in the courtroom! We will now conduct an experiment. Throughout it, I expect everyone in this courtroom, except myself, to remain absolutely silent, especially so the defense, the prosecution, and the audience. Bailiff, are we ready to commence?"

The bailiff nodded and opened the hall's wide doors, bellowing as he did so:

"Edna Ashdown!"

A petite figure emerged from the gloomy recesses of the witness waiting room. She hesitated on the threshold and then, head held high, eyes unflinchingly affixed upon the judge, she entered, confidently striding forward, until she bumped into the first chair. Baffled, she stopped and extended her hand in the general direction of this seemingly unexpected impediment.

Everyone held his breath as she negotiated a tortuous path around the first chair only to overturn the second. Thunderstruck, she froze, her chest fluttering with shallow breath, her hands twitching nervously as she plucked at a white kerchief.

"Go on," - the judge encouraged her - "we haven't got all day!"

Awaking from her stupor, she again resumed a self-assured gait and headed straight towards the empty space vacated by the now removed witness stand.

"It is no longer there." - Commented the judge softly - "You may wish to consult your defense attorney as to its whereabouts."

She turned around and faced the prosecution:

"Mr. Benoit," - she called - "what's going on? Why have you moved all the furniture around?"

When her plea remained unanswered, her anxiety grew discernibly:

"Mr. Benoit? Mr. Whitmore?"

"Bailiff," - sonorated the judge - "will you please ask Mr. Whitmore to join us?"

Startled, Edna Ashdown took a step forward and then collapsed, unconscious.

7. Unveiled

There he was, on the reinstated witness stand, fat fingers and all, my snitch. Beady eyes rolling in an avalanche of corpulence, fleshy hand waving as he strove to make a point or disprove one.

"Medically, she is completely cortically blind. She fractured her skull when she was six and the fragments caused severe bilateral occipital damage."

"She can't see a thing?"

"Not a thing."

"Then she has been lying to the detectives and the prosecution here?"

"Oh, no!" - Protested my erstwhile snitch - "She is convinced that she can see as well as any of us in this courtroom. She is not aware that she has become blind. As far as she is concerned, her visual faculties are intact. She vigorously rejects any evidence to the contrary. She is suffering from the Anton-Babinsky Syndrome."

The prosecutor lost patience:

"Doctor, can you please make it simple for us poor laymen? Did she or didn't she witness her mother's murder?"

"Of course she didn't!" - The witness leaned forward, perspiring profusely - "She can't see, I am telling you!"

"Then why would she invent something like this about her own father?"

"You have to ask a psychologist! I am not qualified to answer your question." - He looked strangely triumphant.

"Speculate!" - Urged him the prosecutor. The defense objected, but the judge allowed it.

The witness took off his horn-rimmed glasses and polished them with a dainty cloth he produced from a velvet case:

"Anton-Babinsky patients confabulate."

"You mean lie?"

"No, I don't mean lie! These patients are not aware that they are not telling the truth. Their brain compensates for their lack of vision by embroidering plots and concocting stories, by seeing objects and people where there are none. This is their way of rendering their shattered world predictable, plausible, comprehensible, and safe again."

The prosecutor looked thunderstruck:

"Are you telling us that these so-called patients can deceive any number of people into believing that they are actually not blind and then conjure and propagate intricate lies, implicating innocent people - and all the time they don't know what they are doing?"

"You got that right." - Nodded the witness.

A brief silence and then: "Why did you contact Detective Escher with the information that led to the arrest of George Ashdown?"

My snitch smiled ruefully:

"Edna Ashdown is my patient. It is not easy to raise a child afflicted with Anton-Babinsky. You never know where reality ends and fantasy intrudes. You never know what and whom to believe. As she grew older, her denial of her condition grew fierce. To avoid having to confront new objects and new people, she simply never left home. In that familiar environment, she could go on pretending that she still had her sight. Her father gave in to her. It was a kind of shared psychosis, the two of them, a folie-a-deux. He would never move furniture around, for instance, always careful to restore everything to its proper place. They never had guests. Together, they maintained the pretence that she was normal, that nothing has changed."

He gulped down some water, avoided my searing stare and continued:

"In the last few years, though, there has been a fundamental transformation in her behavior. She became increasingly more delusional and paranoid. She

believed that her father was ... molesting her ... forcing her to participate in orgies with his friends. Then she went on to accuse him of murdering his wife, her mother ..."

"Where by the way is her mother?" - Enquired the prosecutor. Defense objection overruled.

"She left, I guess. One day she was there, the next day she was gone. No one has heard from her since."

"So, George Ashdown might well have murdered her?"

This time the defense objection stuck.

"If he did murder her, Edna definitely could not have witnessed it!" - Retorted the doctor, his voice rising above the tumult.

When the storm calmed down:

"I contacted Detective Escher because I wanted it all out in the open before it escalates dangerously. I wanted it to be established beyond a doubt and in a court of law that George Ashdown is innocent and that his daughter is blind. I knew that, ensconced in her own cocoon, she would be able fool the Detective into believing her and, consequently, into arresting George Ashdown."

"You sure did a good job, wasting the taxpayer's money, doctor. Was George Ashdown in on it with you?"

"It was completely my initiative!" - Exclaimed my snitch, his multiple chins reverberating - "Mr. Ashdown had nothing to do with it!"

It was a lost cause. Having wasted another hour on failed attempts to poke holes in the good doctor's credibility and version of the events, the prosecution dropped the charges. It was only a formality. The judge dismissed the case and declared George Ashdown free. I trundled towards the precinct and was assigned a desk job that very afternoon. My career as a detective was over and done with. Edna saw to it. Edna and my snitch.

8. Denouement

The body of Rachel Ashdown was discovered two years later. It formed part of a concrete rampart that surrounded the Ashdown estate. Edna married the doctor and he moved to live with her and with her father. The neighbors have been complaining of lewd behavior ever since, some even darkly hinting of an incestuous connection between the three occupants.

Although the new evidence was compelling, George Ashdown could not be apprehended and tried for the murder of his wife. He stood protected by the inviolable legal principle of double jeopardy: having been acquitted of it once, he could not be tried again for the same crime.

I still ride a desk in Vice. From time to time, I take a patrol car and swing by the Ashdown residence. Just to let them know that the Law never rests, that we are keeping our eyes peeled, just in case. Once I saw Edna, standing by the window, dark glasses on her eyes, her slender figure encircled by a corpulent and flabby forearm on one side and by a wrinkled, suntanned hand on the other. She was smiling, radiant and content. Then

she withdrew inside and let down the curtain. I drove on.

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Live Burial

"We know of nothing so agonizing upon Earth -- we can dream of nothing half so hideous in the realms of the nethermost hell."

(Edgar Allen Poe, describing premature burial in his short story "The Cask of Amontillado")

The medical doctor looked distinguished and composed. Clad in an expensive suit, sporting wire-framed glasses, immaculate tie only imperceptibly askew. His coiffed mane of white hair matched his carefully manicured hands. He patiently and imperturbably responded to the questions hurled at him by the members of the investigative committee:

"In his youth, the President suffered from a bout of Landry Ascending Paralysis. This may explain his taphophobia." - And forestalling protest, before anyone could chide him cynically for his jargon-laden opening statement, he raised his fleshy white hand:

"Bear with me, lady and gentlemen. I will explain. I used these medical terms only to render the record exact and comprehensive."

He coughed into a monogrammed kerchief and settled back into the squeaking leather chair:

"When in his early teens, the President suffered from flu-like symptoms that persisted for months and then vanished as they had erupted: mysteriously and

suddenly. When he was 18, He endured an especially pernicious attack that culminated in a strange paralysis. It started in the extremities: his hands, then arms, and legs. It progressed and ascended to affect the breathing muscles and finally his face froze in a grimace and his vocal cords were made useless by the affliction. He remained speechless and motionless for a few weeks, attached to intravenous drips of gamma-globulin. This was an instance of Landry Ascending Paralysis, probably brought on by contaminated poultry he ate."

The doctor shut his eyes, his brow furrowed in the profound pain of memory:

"During his prolonged incapacitation, visitors mistook him for dead and crossed themselves. At least once, an orderly wrapped him up in a blanket and was about to transport him to the mortuary. Even pathologists were misled by his appearance and muscle tone. It was a very traumatic experience for everyone involved. His family mounted a 24 hours a day watch to prevent his premature internment."

"Were you his primary physician then?"

"Yes, Mrs. Chairwoman." - Replied the doctor awkwardly and massaged his translucent and venous temples.

"Proceed, please".

"Not surprisingly, when he recovered, the patient developed a fear of being buried alive. He had recurring nightmares of waking up inside a coffin whose lid was soldered, being thrust into the blazing orifice of a

crematorium oven. He would wake up flailing, his mouth agape in a silent scream and his limbs set-to grotesquely."

"Did he seek professional help for this problem?"

The doctor shrugged:

"The nightmares soon ceased, leaving behind only a trace of claustrophobia, a fear of confined and dark spaces. He was able to function perfectly: to raise a family, perform aptly as a lawyer, and then get himself elected and re-elected, becoming the President we have all known and loved so much."

A murmur of acquiescence, a commiserating susurration engulfed the chamber.

"His terror having subsided, he applied himself to selflessly securing and furthering the welfare of his subjects." - The doctor adjusted his delicate frame in the chair and asked for a glass of water, which was promptly delivered by the bailiff.

"As he grew older and nearer of that which none of us can evade, he again became consumed with fearful fantasies. His favorite reading became some tale by Edgar Allen Poe, in which an unfortunate is immured alive. His bed was immersed in numerous Greek and Roman texts describing warriors and consuls who stood up during their own funerals to protest their imputed mortality. He began obsessing about the possibility of being interred while still breathing. He studied crumbling medical texts from the 18th and 19th centuries which warned against the perils of death-

imitating paralyses brought on by cholera, the plague, and typhoid fever. He would wake up sweat-drenched, heart palpitating, and shriek in horror. The sound of his own voice seemed to have soothed him, though."

"How frequent were these episodes?"

The doctor reflected and consulted his notes. At length he answered to audible gasps of incredulity:

"Once or twice a night, every second night, in the last twenty years or so of his life."

The dainty chairwoman held a trembling palm to her lips: "That is awful!" - She exclaimed - "The poor man! How was he able to run this country at the same time?"

"He was not alone." - Remarked another member, a much-respected historian - "George Washington suffered from it, too. He was so terrified that he ordered that his body be kept above ground for three days before an eventual burial, just to make sure that he was, indeed, deceased. Hans Christian Andersen posted "I am not dead" signs next to his hotel bed to ward off eager undertakers. In the 19th century, Germans had Leichenhäuser, or 'waiting mortuaries', where corpses were laid for observation for a few days before they were actually committed to the burial grounds. In Munich, the fingers and toes of unexpectedly stirring bodies were supposed to activate a giant harmonium to which they were attached and cause it to play."

A muffled wave of shock and muted laughter having subsided, the historian expounded further:

"Throughout the 18th century, they had what they called 'security coffins' with flags and bells and whistles that the unfortunate inhabitant could use to call for help. These contraptions capitalized on not entirely unfounded or irrational fears: to this very day, people are mistaken for dead in hospitals and morgues across the land."

At length, as spirits have settled down, the medical doctor continued his testimony:

"The President - for he was already President by that time - disquieted by his reveries ordered a burial chapel to be constructed under the Presidential Palace. It was vast and filled with provisions for three months of survival. These were regularly replaced with fresh produce, water, and medicines. All the doors leading into this crypt as well as separating its compartments were equipped with tinkles and electric buzzers. He had a TV set installed and the latest model laptop with a connection to the Internet."

"What did he hope to achieve by this blatant squandering of public funds?" - Prompted the sole opposition figure on the panel.

The doctor winced distastefully:

"Patience is a virtue, Sir. Rest assured that your curiosity will be satisfied by the time I am finished without undue interruptions."

The other members smirked and clapped and venomously eyed their disrespectful colleague. The

doctor went on, mollified by their unanimous and visible support:

"The chapel's roof was fitted with vents, letting fresh air from the outside flow in. Megaphones, telephones, wireless communications devices, and piles of batteries ensured that the occupant of the chapel can alert the outside world to his unfortunate predicament. To compensate for the potential failure of all these gadgets, holes were drilled into the walls with tubes leading to the surface."

"It is there that his body was found?" - Enquired the historian.

"Yes." - Confirmed the doctor - "He was dead a few hours when we found him. Strangely, he hasn't called for help, hasn't touched the food or water, hasn't made an attempt to escape. It seems as though he went there deliberately."

"But, why?" - Cried the anguished Chairwoman, who was rumored to have had a fling with the President in their now remote youth.

"It strikes one as a suicide." - Sneered the oppositioner. The other members stared at him aghast.

"Sometimes the only way to conquer our fears is to confront them head on." - Said the doctor - "I believe that this is what he did. Unable to face the mounting dread, the unrequited nights, the closing realization of his inevitable demise, he preferred to control his demons rather than give in to them. He dressed elegantly, descended to the burial chapel whose every

detail he intimately designed and there he ended his life, his honor and dignity intact. Administering his own death was the only way of making sure that he is not buried alive. We must respect his choice and his courage."

"Indeed, we must." - Concluded the Chairwoman and discreetly wiped an errant tear.

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The Capgras Shift

1. The Sinking

My marriage aborted, my private practice stillborn, I packed stale possessions in two flabby suitcases and bade my sterile apartment a tearless goodbye. On the spur of the moment, I had applied a fortnight before to a government post and, to my consternation, had won it handily. I was probably the only applicant.

It was an odd sort of job. The state authorities had just finished submerging 4 towns, 6 cemeteries, and numerous farms under the still, black waters of a new dammed reservoir of drinking water. The process was drawn out and traumatic. Tight-knit communities unraveled, families scattered, businesses ruined. The government undertook to provide the former inhabitants with psychological support: an on-site therapist (that's me), social workers, even a suicide line.

I had to relocate, hence my haphazard departure. I took the bus to the nearest big city and hitchhiked from there. The fare just about amortized my travel allowance for the entire week. I had to trudge in mud the last two or three kilometers only to find myself in a disorienting, nightmarish landscape: isled rooftops and church spires puncturing the abnormally still surface of a giant man-made lake. I waded ashore, amidst discarded furniture and toys and contemplated the buried devastation.

My clinic, I discovered, was a ramshackle barrack, replete with a derelict tiny lawn, strewn with rusting

hulks of household goods. I was shown by a surly superintendent into a tiny enclosure: my flat. Crammed into a cubicle were a folding metal bed, military-issue blankets, and a depleted pillow. Still, I slept like a baby and woke up refreshed.

The first thing that struck me was the silence, punctuated by a revving-thrumming engine now and then: not a twitter, not a hum, not a human voice. There was no hot water, so I merely washed my armpits, my face and hands and feet and combed my hair the best I could, which wasn't much by anyone's standards. I was plunged into the maelstrom straightaway. My first patients, an elderly couple, their disintegrating marriage and crumbling health mirrored by the withering of their habitat.

The days passed, consumed by endless processions of juvenile delinquents, losers, the old, the sickly, the orphaned, the unemployed, and the abandoned, the detritus of human settlements now made to vanish at the bottom of a lake. It was a veritable makeshift refugee camp and I found myself immersed in the woes and complaints of misfits who lost their sense of community and means of livelihood and sought meaning in their cruel individual tragedies, but in vain.

On the Tuesday of the second week of what was fast becoming a surrealistic quagmire, I met Isabel. She was the very last in a long list of appointments and I kept praying that she would not keep hers, as many of them were wont to do. But she did and punctually so. I was struck by her regal bearing, her poise, her coiffed hair, and her dazzling but tasteful jewelry. Her equine face

and aquiline nose meshed well with just a hint of the oriental slant and cheekbones to render her exotic.

She sat unbidden and watched me intently, benignly ignoring my rhetorical question:

"You are Isabel Kidlington, aren't you?"

Of course she was. Three centuries ago, her family established an eponymous town, now sunken beneath the calm surface of the lake.

Our first meeting ended frostily and unproductively but, in the fullness of time, as she opened up to me, I found myself looking forward to our encounters. I always scheduled her last, so that I could exceed the 45 minutes straightjacket of the classic therapy session. She was the first person in a long time - who am I kidding? the first person ever - who really listened to what I had to say. She rarely spoke, but, when she did, it was with the twin authority of age and wisdom. I guess I grew to love and respect her.

I wasn't sure why Isabel sought my meager services. She possessed enough common sense and fortitude to put to shame any therapist I knew. She never asked for my advice or shared her problems with me. She just made an appearance at the appointed time and sat there, back erect, hands resting in her lap, her best ear forward, the better to capture my whining litany and to commiserate.

One day, though, she entered my crude office and remained standing.

"Isabel," - I enquired - "is everything alright?"

"You know that I have been provided with a residence on Elm Street, now that my family home is underwater."

The "residence" was an imposing mansion, with an enormous driveway, an English, sculpted garden, and a series of working fountains. Isabel rented the place from a British-Canadian mogul of sorts, as she disdainfully informed me a while back.

"It's been invaded by strangers." - She made a dramatic announcement.

I looked at her, not comprehending:

"You mean burglars? Squatters? Who are these strangers? Why don't you call the Police to evict them? It could be dangerous, you know!"

She waved away my concerned pleas impatiently:

"I can't call the police to evict them because they have assumed the bodies of my family members."

When she saw the bafflement in my eyes, she reiterated slowly, as if aiming to get through to a slow-witted, yet cherished, interlocutor:

"These invaders - they look like my husband and my son. But they are not. They are doubles. They are somehow wrong, fake, ersatz, if you know what I mean."

I didn't.

"I love my real relatives but not the current occupants of their corporeal remains. I keep my door locked at night!"

She made it sound like an unprecedented event.

"Isabel, sit down, please." - I said and she did, white-jointed hands clenched and venous. I decided not to confront her illogic but rather to leverage it to expose the absurdity of her assertions.

"Why would these body-snatchers go to all this trouble?"

"Don't be silly!" - She snapped - "Money, of course! They are after my fortune! These look-alikes are planning to murder me and abscond with my considerable fortune. They are all in my will, you see, and they know it! But they can't wait their turn, they are anxious to lay their dirty paws on my checkbook! They are afraid that I will change my mind!"

"You sound like you are referring to your true relatives." - I pointed out.

She recoiled:

"These criminals that took over my family, I want them gone! I want my husband back and my son!"

"Then why don't you simply alter your will and let them know about it? Announce the changes in a family gathering! That way they will lose all interest in you and move on to their next victim! That way, all incentives to murder you will be removed, you see."

She glanced at me dumbfounded:

"That's a wonderful idea, dear! You are so clever, you are so astute when you put your mind to it! Thank you! You can't imagine what a relief it is to strike upon the solution to such an impossible situation!"

She sprang from the creaky armchair and extended her hand to fondle my cheek:

"Thank you, honey. You made me proud."

I felt like a million dollars.

2. The Syndrome

Milton's eyeglasses glinted unsettlingly as he took in my crumpled clothes and unruly hair:

"So, you traveled all night, by yourself, in a hired car, to ask me this? She must mean all the world to you!"

He hasn't changed: cherubic, lecherous, bald, and clad in fading dungarees and Sellotaped, stapled sandals. Milton smelled of coffee grounds and incense.

He laid a hirsute hand on my shoulder and I retreated inadvertently and then apologized. He smiled mischievously:

"You are tired. Let's go to my office. You can refresh yourself there and I will tell you everything you ever wanted to know about the Capgras Syndrome and never dared to ask."

"Capgras Syndrome???"

"Coffee first!" - Milton pronounced and wheeled me forward.

Ensnared in an ancient armchair, steamy libation in hand, I listened intently, absorbing every word that came out of the mouth of arguably the world's greatest expert on delusions.

"It's nothing new." - Said Milton, chewing on an ancient, ashen clay pipe - "It was first described by two French psychiatrists in 1923. Elderly people believe that their relatives have been replaced by malicious, conspiring doubles. They lock themselves in, buy guns, change their wills, complain to the authorities. If not checked with antipsychotic medication, they become violent. Quite a few cases of murder, resisting arrest, that sort of thing."

"What goes wrong with these people?"

Milton shrugged and tapped the empty implement on a much-tortured edge of his desk:

"Lots of speculation around, but nothing definite. Some say it's a problem with face recognition. You heard of prosopagnosia? Patients fail to identify their nearest and dearest, even though they react emotionally when they see them. Capgras is the mirror image, I guess: a failure to react emotionally to familiar faces. But guess is what we have all been doing in the last, oh, eight decades." - He concluded with undisguised disgust.

"I need help with this client, Milton," - I interjected -
"and you are not helping me at all."

He chuckled sarcastically:

"How often do I hear it from my patients?"

"She is not paranoid, you know. Her mind is sharp and crystal-clear and balanced."

He nodded wearily:

"That's what confounds us with this syndrome. The patients are 'normal' by any definition of this word that you care to adopt. They are only convinced that family members, friends, even neighbors are being substituted for - and, of course, they are not."

He crouched next to my seat:

"Soon, she will begin to doubt you and then herself. Next time she catches her own reflection in a mirror or a window, she will start to question her own identity. She will insist that she has been replaced by an entity from outer space or something. She is bad news. The literature describes the case of a woman who flew into jealous rages at the sight of her own reflection because she thought it was another woman trying to seduce her husband."

Milton was evidently agitated, the first I have seen him this way. As my teacher and mentor, he kept a stiff upper lip in the face of the most outlandish disorders and the most all-pervasive ignorance. And in the face of our budding, dead end love.

"What do you advise me to do?" - I mumbled almost inaudibly.

"If she refuses anti-psychotic medication, bail out. Commit her. She is a danger both to herself and to others, not the least of whom, to you."

"I can't do that to her." - I protested - "I am the only person she trusts in the whole world. She is so scared, it breaks my heart. And just imagine what the family is going through: she even wants to change her will to disinherit them."

Milton's pained expression deepened:

"Then you are faced with only one alternative: psychodrama. To save her, you must enter her world, as convincingly as you can. Play her game, as it were. Pretend that you believe in her lunatic delusions. Act the part."

3. Dinner

"Will you?" - Enthused Isabel - "That's mighty fine of you! I have arranged for everyone to join me for dinner tomorrow evening. It's a Saturday, so people don't have to go to work the next day."

"How very considerate." - I stammered and Isabel laughed throatily:

"Don't be so distraught. It won't be as awkward as you fear. Sit next to me and watch the show as I expose these fraudsters and frustrate their plans!".

About to exit, she turned around, her wrinkled face suddenly smooth and becalmed:

"I will be expecting you. Be there. You must be present. For your own sake as much as for mine."

And she left the door ajar as she swooshed down the hall and out the building, into the flaking snow.

Isabel never looked more imposing as she sat at the head of the elongated table, attired in a sleeveless white chiffon dress, no hint of make-up on her imperious, commanding face. A beetle-shaped brooch complemented a lavish pearl necklace that emphasized the contours of her truly delicate neck. She was very animated, laughed a lot, and administered light touches of familiarity and affection to her husband and son, who flanked her.

Her spouse, a rubicund mount of a man, face varicose and hairy hands resting on his folded napkin, was clearly still smitten with his wife, paying close and ostentatious attention to her minutest wishes and utterances. His enormous girth twitched and turned towards her, like a plant craving the sun. His deep blue eyes glittered every time she humored him or re-arranged his cutlery.

The son was more reluctant, contemplating his mother with suspicion and his father with an ill-disguised hint of contempt. He was lanky, with a balding pate, and sported a failed attempt at a moustache, inexpertly daubed on his freckled face. He was also myopic and

his hands fluttered restlessly throughout the evening. I found him most disagreeable.

There was a third person at the table: a mousy, inconsequential thing with an excruciatingly bad sartorial taste. She stared at everyone through a pair of dead, black, enormous pools that passed for eyes. Her hands were sinewy and contorted and she kept fidgeting, clasping and unclasping an ancient purse ("a gift from mother"), and rearranging a stray curl that kept obscuring her view. No one introduced us and she made it a point to avoid me, so I let it go.

The dishes cleared, Isabel came to the painful point:

"Dears," - she declared - "I summoned you today to make an important announcement. As you well know, my previous will and testament left everything to you, the two exclusive loves of my life." - A hiss of withdrawn breaths welcomed the word "previous".

"However, in the last couple of weeks, I have had reason to suspect foul play."

They stared at her, not comprehending.

"I am convinced that you are not who you purport to be. You look like my dearest but you are actually impostors, doubles, hired by the perpetrators of a malicious operation, bent of absconding with my inheritance."

The silence was palpable as her kin, jaws dropped in disbelief, listened to the unfolding speech with growing horror.

"I don't know yet what you have done with my real relatives but, rest assured, I intend to find out. Still, I am being told by one and sundry that I may be wrong or, frankly, that I am off my rocker, as they say."

"Hear, hear!" - Interjected her son and rose from his seat, as though to leave the table.

"Sit down!" - Snapped Isabel and he did, meekly, though clearly resentful.

"I have devised a test. Should you pass it, I will offer you all my most prostrate apologies and hope for your forgiveness. If you fail, his shall be proof of the subterfuge. I am then bent on altering my will to exclude all of you from it and bestow my entire estate on my good companion here." - And she pointed at a mortified me.

They all turned in their chairs and studied the intruder at length. The son's lips moved furiously but he remained inaudible. The husband merely shrugged and reverted to face his tormentor. Only the third guest protested by extending a pinkish tongue in my direction, careful to remain unobserved by her hostess.

"I will ask each one of you three questions." - Proceeded my new benefactor, unperturbed - "You can take as much time as you need to respond to them. Once you have given your answers, there is no going back, no second chance. So, think carefully. Your entire pecuniary future depends on it. These are the terms that I am setting. You are free to leave the room now, if you wish. Of course, by doing so, you will have forfeited

your share of my riches." - She sneered unpleasantly.
No one made a move.

"I take it then that we are all agreed." - Isabel proceeded and turned toward her husband:

"John, or whoever you are," - He recoiled as if struck with a fist - "what was the color of the curtains in the small hotel where we have consummated our love for the first time?"

"Must I go through this in public, in front of my son and this complete stranger?" - He bellowed, his monstrous frame towering over her. But she remained undaunted and unmoved and finally, he settled back in his creaking chair and resignedly mumbled:

"The room had no curtains. You complained all morning because the sunlight shone straight on your face and wouldn't let you fall asleep."

His visage was transformed by the memory, radiant and gentle now, as he re-lived the moment.

"True. You have clearly done your homework." - She confirmed reluctantly and addressed her son:

"Edward, what did you see in a book that made you cry so violently and inconsolably when you just a toddler?"

"It was an art book. There was a color reproduction of a painting of a group of patricians standing on an elevated porch, glancing over the railing at a scene below them. I can't recall any other detail, but the whole atmosphere was tenebrous and sinister. I was so frightened that I

burst into wails. For some reason, you were not there, you were gone!" - And he pouted as he must have done back then when he had felt abandoned and betrayed by his mother.

"Althea, what was I wearing the first time we met, when Edward introduced you to me?"

Althea, the mouse, looked up in surprise:

"You introduced me to Edward, not the other way around!" - She protested - "I met you at the clinic, remember? Lording it over everyone, as usual." - She laughed bitterly and I shot her a warning glance, afraid that she might provoke Isabel into violent action - "Anyways, you were wearing precisely what you have on today, down to the tiniest detail. Even the brooch is the same, if I can tell."

And so it went. All three were able to fend off Isabel's fiendish challenges with accurate responses. Finally, evidently exhausted, she conceded defeat:

"Though my heart informs me differently, my head prevails and I am forced to accept that you are my true family. I hereby offer you the prostrate apologies that I have promised to make before." - She sprang abruptly from her seat - "And now, I am tired, I must sleep." - She ignored her husband's clumsy attempt to kiss her on the cheek and, not bidding farewell or good night to any of us, she exited the room in an apparent huff.

4. Post-Mortem

"What did you make of what you have just witnessed?"

Isabel snuck into the guest bedroom and settled into an overstuffed armchair at a penumbral corner. She was still wearing the same dress, though her jewelry was gone. I watched her reflection in my makeup mirror, as I was removing the war paint from my face, clad in my two-part, lilac-strewn pajamas. I felt naked and embarrassed and violated.

"They did pretty well." - I hedged my answer, not sure where she might be leading.

"They did rather too well." - She triumphantly proclaimed, her eyes shining.

"What do you mean by that?" - I enquired, my curiosity genuinely awakened.

"Pray, tell me, what was I wearing when we first met?"

I couldn't conjure the image, no matter how hard I tried.

"I am not sure." - I finally admitted defeat

"What was the color of the curtains in your mother's kitchen?"

"White, with machine embroidered strawberries or raspberries or something of the sort."

"What was the first horror movie that you have seen?"

"I can't be expected to remember that!" - I exclaimed.

"Of course you can't, dear. No one can. You'd be lucky to get one response out of three correct, you know." - She agreed - "This is the point I am trying to make. Didn't you find my family's omniscience and total recall a trifle overdone? Didn't you ask yourself for a minute how come they are all blessed with such supreme, marvelous memories?"

She sounded distant and heartbroken as she said:

"I have changed my will, you know. They couldn't fool me with their slick off-the-cuff ready-made know-it-all responses! It's all yours now. Sleep well, my true friend and, henceforth, my only heir!."

She glided over and kissed me on the cheek, once, like a butterfly alighting.

I was woken up by a wet kiss planted on my lips by Isabel's husband.

"What do you think you are doing?" - I hissed and withdrew to the top of the bed - "If you don't leave the room this instant, I will scream!"

He looked hurt and baffled as he slid off the mattress and stretched his monolithic corpulence.

"What's wrong?" - He enquired - "Anything I did to offend you last night? You shouldn't have asked all

these questions if you didn't want to hear my answers, you know!"

"Where's Isabel?" - I demanded.

He eyed me queerly and pleaded sadly:

"We are not going to go through all this again, are we, dear?"

"Go through what and I am asking you for the last time: where is Isabel, your wife?"

He sighed and collapsed on the bed, depressing it considerably as he held onto one of the bedposts:

"I will call Dr. Milton. Promise me you won't do anything stupid until he has had the chance to see you."

"I am going to call the police on you. Isabel announces her intention to disinherit you and the next morning she is mysteriously gone. Dead, for all I know!"

"Isabel is alive and well, I give you my word." - Said her husband and, for some reason, I believed him. He sounded sincere.

"Then why can't I see her?"

"You can, once Dr. Milton arrives. Is that too much to ask? He will be here in less than half an hour. Edward already apprised him of the situation last night."

"Last night?" - I felt confused - "What situation? And who's Dr. Milton?"

He got up and made to leave when I noticed that my makeup compact was gone.

"Where are my things? What have you done with my things?"

"They are in the next room. Dr. Milton will let you have them after he has made sure that they include nothing dangerous."

"Dangerous?" - I exploded - "Am I a prisoner here? I insist to use the phone! I am going to call the police right now!"

"Please, for your own good, don't exit the room." - Said my uninvited visitor - "I have covered the mirrors here and have removed your make up pouch but I can't well take care of all the reflecting surfaces: windows and such."

"Mirrors? What are you going about? You need professional help. I am a therapist. Won't you tell me what the problem is? What have you done to Isabel? Are you afraid to look at yourself in the mirror? Are you terrified of what you might see there? Have you killed her? Are you tormented by guilt?" - It wasn't very professional behavior but I decided that I had nothing to lose by abrogating the therapeutic protocol. Clearly, I was being held hostage by a gang of killers or a murderous cult.

"Isabel." - Said a familiar voice from across the threshold.

"Thank God you have arrived!" - Cried Isabel's husband
- "She is having one of her attacks."

Into the chamber came Milton, clay pipe, eternal dungarees and all. He was accompanied by a young woman that looked startlingly familiar. She glanced at me from across the room. She smiled. She appeared to be friendly, so I reciprocated, hesitantly.

Milton said:

"I hope you don't mind that I have asked your therapist to join me. She told me everything about last night. You invited her here as your guest, you remember?"

I didn't remember anything of the sort. Still, I appraised my "therapist" more attentively. She was a mousy, inconsequential thing with an excruciatingly bad sartorial taste. She stared at me through a pair of dead, black, enormous pools that passed for eyes. Her hands were sinewy and contorted and she kept fidgeting, clasping and unclasping my makeup purse, and rearranging a stray curl that kept obscuring her view.

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Folie a Plusieurs

By design, both agents were shrouded in darkness. I could see their silhouettes, the army-like crew cut, the wire-rimmed glasses, the more senior agent's hearing aid. Their hands rested, lifeless and stolid, on the plain wooden conference table that separated us. They were waiting for my response, immobile, patient, pent up aggression in check, heads slightly bowed. The overhead neon lights crackled and fizzled ominously but otherwise the room was soundproof and windowless. I was led there via a bank of elevators and a series of elaborate Escher-like staircases. By now, I was utterly disoriented.

"Shared Psychotic Disorder is not a new diagnosis." - I explained again - "For a long time it was known as 'Folie a Deux'".

The younger agent shifted ever so imperceptibly on his plastic chair but said nothing. His colleague repeated his question, wearily, as though accustomed to interrogating the densest of people:

"But can it affect more than one person?"

"Yes, it can. The literature contains cases of three, four, and more individuals consumed by shared delusional beliefs and even hallucinations." - I raised my palm, forestalling his next attempt to interject:

"But - and that's a big but - the people who partake in common psychotic delusions are all intimately involved

with each other: they share living quarters, they are members of the same family, or sect, or organization. To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever documented an occurrence of shared psychosis among totally unrelated strangers."

This caveat evidently got the young agent's attention. He perked up, straightened his posture, and addressed me for the first time:

"Then what is mass psychosis?"

"A myth," - I said - "assiduously cultivated by an eyeball-hungry media."

The senior member of the team chuckled softly:

"C'mon, doctor. Thousands of people claim to see the Virgin Mary or a UFO at the same time - that's not psychotic?"

"It's a momentary delusion, alright, but it is far from psychosis."

"Can you help us tell the difference?" - The young one was evidently losing patience with the whole exercise.

"I would be able to help you better if you were to tell me what this is all about."

"We can't." - snapped the younger, not bothering to hide his exasperation - "Just answer our questions, will you?"

The older of the two laid a calming hand on the forearm of his impetuous partner:

"Doctor," - his voice was appropriately a resonating baritone - "you have to believe us that it is a matter of utmost importance to our national security. That's all we are authorized to divulge at this stage of the proceedings."

I sighed:

"Have it your way, then. A delusional belief is not the same as a momentary hallucination. People who claim to have seen the Virgin Mary or a UFO, have typically reverted to their normal lives afterwards. The incidents left a very small psychological footprint on the witnesses. Not so with a shared psychotic disorder. Those affected structure their entire existence around their inane convictions."

"Can you give us some examples?"

"Sure I can. There are hundreds if not thousands of cases meticulously documented ever since the 19th century. Some patients became convinced that their homes were being infiltrated by aliens or foreign powers. An unfortunate couple was so afraid of hostile electromagnetic radiation that they converted their apartment into a Faraday Cage: they sealed it hermetically at an enormous expense and took out all the windows and interconnecting doors. They claimed that the radiation was intended to dehydrate them by inducing diarrhea and to starve them through chronic indigestion."

The young agent whistled and the older one emitted one of his soft laughs.

"In another instance, an entire family took on enormous credits, sold their house, and quit their jobs because they delusionally talked themselves into believing that one of the sons was about to sign a multi-million dollar contract with a Hollywood studio. They even hired engineers and architects to lay out plans for a new mansion, replete with a swimming pool."

The young one could no longer hide his mirth.

"Of course, there's the run-of-the mill paranoid, persecutory delusions about how the FBI, or CIA, or NSA, take your pick, are tapping the family phone, or shadowing its members as they go innocently about their business."

"Why would anyone believe such crap?" - Asked the senior one.

"Because the source of the delusional belief, the person who invents it and then imposes it on others, is perceived to be authoritative and superior in intelligence, or in social standing, or to have access to privileged information."

They exchanged glances and then:

"So, it's like a cult? A guru and his followers?"

"Exactly. The primary case - the originally delusional person - does his or her best to keep the others in relative seclusion and social isolation. That way, he monopolizes the flow of information and opinions. He filters all the incoming data and blocks anything which

might interfere, upset, or contradict the delusional content. The primary case become sort of a gatekeeper."

They whispered to each other, nodding and shaking their penumbral heads vigorously, but never gesticulating with their hands. Then, following the briefest of silences, the older agent said:

"What if a delusional belief were shared by all the inhabitants of the planet, by everyone, everywhere, almost without exception?"

"Such a delusional belief would be indistinguishable from reality." - I answered - "In such a world, who would be able to demonstrate the delusion's true character and to refute it or replace it by something real and viable? Luckily, it is impossible to engineer such a situation."

"Why so?"

"To create a long-lasting, all-pervasive, credible, and influential delusional belief on a global scale, one would need to recruit a source of unimpeachable authority and to force all the media in the world to collaborate in disseminating his or her psychotic content across continents and seas. Even in this day and age, such an undertaking would prove to be formidable and, in my opinion, face insurmountable psychological, not to mention logistical, obstacles."

The younger agent tilted his chair backward on its hind legs:

"So, even if people witness the unfolding of some incredible event on television, attested to by thousands of eyewitnesses and covered by a zillion TV stations, they are still unlikely to believe it? And they are bound to persist in their disbelief when the President of the United States of America addresses the nation to confirm that the event had actually taken place?"

"That's not the same thing." - I explained, as patiently as I could. This cryptic and one-sided exchange was beginning to unnerve me - "An event that unfolds in real time on television and is witnessed by thousands of people on the ground is real, it is not a delusion."

"You are contradicting yourself," - the senior agent rebuked me gently - "As you have acknowledged earlier, crowds composed of thousands of individuals claimed to have seen UFOs or the Virgin Mary but their testimonies render neither apparition real. This is the mass psychosis that my colleague here had mentioned earlier. You objected to the term, but whatever you want to call it, the phenomenon exists: large groups of people see and hear and smell and touch things that simply aren't there. It happens all the time."

"Mass hallucinations do happen." - I conceded - "But, I have never seen UFOs or the Virgin Mary on television."

"That's because you aren't watching the right channels," - grinned the younger one - "Television is a medium that is very easy to manipulate: special effects, stunts, old footage, montage, that sort of thing. Haven't you heard of the urban myth that the whole so-called landing on the moon took place in a television studio out in the

desert in Arizona or New-Mexico? It's easy enough to imagine."

I shrugged and straightened in my chair:

"OK, you got me there. If someone with enough resources and authority was hell-bent on staging such a lightshow, he or she could get away with it: witnesses are gullible and prone to auto-suggestion and, as you said, television images are easy to doctor, especially in this digital era."

They remained seated, rigid and staring with hollow, shadowy eyes at me.

I rose from my seat and said:

"Gentlemen, if there is nothing else you need, I should really be on my way. I hope I have been of some ..."

"You have an office in New-York?" - The senior member of the team interrupted me.

I faltered:

"Yes ... I ... That is, my university ... I serve as a consultant to the venture capital arm of my alma mater. They let me use a cubicle in the premises of their New-York subsidiary in the Twin Towers. I am actually flying there tomorrow morning. We have an annual meeting of the Board of Trustees every September 11. Why?"

They both ignored my question and kept staring ahead. Finally, the older agent exhaled and I was startled by the

realization that he has been holding his breath for so long:

"Thank you for coming, doctor. I am sorry that this meeting could not have been as instructive for you as it has proved to be for us. May I just remind you again that you have signed a non-disclosure agreement with this agency. Our conversation is an official secret and divulging its contents may be construed as treason in a time of war."

"War? What war?" - I giggled nervously.

They stood up and opened the door for me, remaining in the shaded part of the room:

"Goodbye, doctor, and Godspeed. Have a safe flight tomorrow."

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The Con Man Cometh

Swathed in luminosity, we stir with measured competence our amber drinks in long-stemmed glasses. You are weighing my offer and I am waiting for your answer with hushed endurance. The armchairs are soft, the lobby is luxurious, as befits five-star hotels. I am not tense. I have anticipated your response even before I made my move.

Soon, temples sheathed in perspiration, you use the outfit's thick paper napkins to wipe it off. Loosen your tie. Pretend to be immersed in calculations. You express strident dissatisfaction and I feign recoil, as though intimidated by your loudness. Withdrawing to my second line of defence, I surrender to your simulated wrath.

The signs are here, the gestures, the infinitesimal movements that you cannot control. I lurk. I know that definite look, that imperceptible twitch, the inevitability of your surrender.

I am a con man and you are my victim. The swindle is unfolding here and now, in this very atrium, amid all the extravagance. I am selling your soul and collecting the change. I am sharpened, like a raw nerve firing impulses to you, receiving yours, an electrical-chemical dialog, consisting of your smelly sweat, my scented exudation. I permeate your cracks. I broker an alliance with your fears, your pains, defence compensatory mechanisms.

I know you.

I've got to meld us into one. As dusk gives way to night, you trust me as you do yourself, for now I am

nothing less than you. Having adopted your particular gesticulation, I nod approvingly with every mention of your family. You do not like me. You sense the danger. Your nostrils flare. Your eyes amok. Your hands so restless. You know me for a bilker, you realise I'll break your heart. I know you comprehend we both are choiceless.

It's not about money. Emotions are at stake. I share your depths of loneliness and pain. Sitting opposed, I see the child in you, the adolescent. I discern the pleading sparkle in your eyes, your shoulders stooping in the very second you've decided to succumb. I am hurting for what I do to you. My only consolation is the inexorability of nature – mine and yours, this world's (in which we find ourselves and not of our choice). Still, we are here, you know.

I empathise with you without speech or motion. Your solitary sadness, the anguish, and your fears. I am your only friend, monopolist of your invisible cries, your inner haemorrhage of salty tears, the tissue scar that has become your being. Like me, the product of uncounted blows (which you sometimes crave).

Being abused is being understood, having some meaning, forming a narrative. Without it, your life is nothing but an anecdotal stream of randomness. I deal the final, overwhelming coup-de-grace that will transform the torn sheets of your biography into a plot. It isn't everyday one meets a cheat. Such confident encounters can render everything explained. Don't give it up. It is a gift of life, not to be frivolously dispensed with. It is a test of worthiness.

I think you qualify and I am the structure and the target you've been searching for and here I am.

Now we are bound by money and by blood. In our common veins flows the same alliance that dilates our pupils. We hail from one beginning. We separated only to unite, at once, in this hotel, this late, and you exclaim: "I need to trust you like I do not trust a soul". You beseech me not to betray your faith. Perhaps not so explicitly, but both your eyes are moist, reflecting your vulnerability.

I gravely radiate my utter guarantee of splendid outcomes. No hint of treason here. Concurrently I am plotting your emotional demise. At your request, not mine. It is an act of amity, to rid you of the very cause of your infirmity. I am the instrument of your delivery and liberation. I will deprive you of your ability to feel, to trust, and to believe. When we diverge, I will have moulded you anew – much less susceptible, much more immune, the essence of resilience.

It is my gift to you and you are surely grateful in advance. Thus, when you demand my fealty, you say: "Do not forget our verbal understanding."

And when I vow my loyalty, I answer: "I shall not forget to stab you in the back."

And now, to the transaction. I study you. I train you to ignore my presence and argue with yourself with the utmost sincerity. I teach you not to resent your weaknesses.

So, you admit to them and I record all your confessions to be used against you to your benefit. Denuded of defences, I leave you wounded by embezzlement, a cold, contemptible exposure. And, in

the meantime, it's only warmth and safety, the intimacy of empathy, the propinquity of mutual understanding.

I only ask of you one thing: the fullest trust, a willingness to yield. I remember having seen the following in an art house movie, it was a test: to fall, spread-eagled from a high embankment and to believe that I am there to catch you and break your lethal plunge.

I am telling you I'll be there, yet you know I won't. Your caving in is none of my concern. I only undertook to bring you to the brink and I fulfilled this promise. It's up to you to climb it, it's up to you to tumble. I must not halt your crash, you have to recompose. It is my contribution to the transformation that metastasised in you long before we met.

But you are not yet at the stage of internalising these veracities. You still naively link feigned geniality to constancy, intimacy and confidence in me and in my deeds, proximity and full disclosure. You are so terrified and mutilated, you come devalued. You cost me merely a whiskey tumbler and a compendium of ordinary words. One tear enough to alter your allegiances. You are malleable to the point of having no identity.

You crave my touch and my affection. I crave your information and unbridled faith. "Here is my friendship and my caring, my tenderness and amity, here is a hug. I am your parent and your shrink, your buddy and your family" – so go the words of this inaudible dialog – "Give me your utter, blind, trust but limit it to one point only: your money or your life."

I need to know about your funds, the riddles of your boardroom, commercial secrets, your skeletons, some

intimate detail, a fear, resurgent hatred, the envy that consumes. I don't presume to be your confidant. Our sharing is confined to the pecuniary. I lull you into the relief that comes with much reduced demands. But you are an experienced businessman! You surely recognise my tactics and employ them, too!

Still, you are both seduced and tempted, though on condition of maintaining "independent thinking". Well, almost independent. There is a tiny crack in your cerebral armour and I am there to thrust right through it. I am ready to habituate you. "I am in full control" – you'd say – "So, where's the threat?" And, truly, there is none.

There's only certainty. The certitude I offer you throughout our game. Sometimes I even venture: "I am a crook to be avoided". You listen with your occidental manners, head tilted obliquely, and when I am finished warning you, you say: "But where the danger lies? My trust in you is limited!" Indeed – but it is there!

I lurk, awaiting your capitulation, inhabiting the margins, the twilight zone twixt greed and paranoia. I am a viral premonition, invading avaricious membranes, preaching a gospel of death and resurrection. Your death, your rising from the dead. Assuming the contours of my host, I abandon you deformed in dissolution.

There's no respite, not even for a day. You are addicted to my nagging, to my penetrating gaze, instinctive sympathy, you're haunted. I don't let go. You are engulfed, cocooned, I am a soul mate of eerie insight, unselfish acumen. I vitiate myself for your minutest needs. I thrive on servitude. I leave no doubt that my self-love is exceeded only by my love for you.

I am useful and you are a user. I am available and you avail yourself. But haven't you heard that there are no free lunches? My restaurant is classy, the prices most exorbitant, the invoices accumulate with every smile, with every word of reassurance, with every anxious inquiry as to your health, with every sacrifice I make, however insubstantial.

I keep accounts in my unstated books and you rely on me for every double entry. The voices I instill in you: "He gives so of himself though largely unrewarded". You feel ashamed, compelled to compensate. A seed of Trojan guilt. I harp on it by mentioning others who deprived me. I count on you to do the rest. There's nothing more potent than egotistic love combined with raging culpability. You are mine to do with as I wish, it is your wish that I embody and possess.

The vise is tightened. Now it's time to ponder whether to feed on you at once or scavenge. You are already dying and in your mental carcass I am grown, an alien. Invoking your immunity, as I am wont to do, will further make you ill and conflict will erupt between your white cells and your black, the twin abodes of your awakened feelings.

You hope against all odds that I am a soul-mate. How does it feel, the solitude? Few days with me – and you cannot recall! But I cannot remember how it feels to be together. I cannot waive my loneliness, my staunch companion. When I am with you, it prospers. And you must pay for that.

I have no choice but to abscond with your possessions, lest I remain bereft. With utmost ethics, I keep you well-

informed of these dynamics and you acknowledge my fragility which makes you desirous to salve my wounds.

But I maintain the benefit of your surprise, the flowing motion. Always at an advantage over you, the interchangeable. I, on the other hand, cannot be replaced, as far as you're concerned. You are a loyal subject of your psychic state while I am a denizen of the eternal hunting grounds. No limits there, nor boundaries, only the nostrils quivering at the game, the surging musculature, the body fluids, the scent of decadence.

Sometime, the prey becomes the predator, but only for a while. Admittedly, it's possible and you might turn the tables. But you don't want to. You crave so to be hunted. The orgiastic moment of my proverbial bullets penetrating willing flesh, the rape, the violation, the metaphoric blood and love, you are no longer satisfied with compromises.

You want to die having experienced this eruption once. For what is life without such infringement if not mere ripening concluding in decay. What sets us, Man, apart from beast is our ability to self-deceive and swindle others. The rogue's advantage over quarry is his capacity to have his lies transmuted till you believe them true.

I trek the unpaved pathways between my truth and your delusions. What am I, fiend or angel? A weak, disintegrating apparition – or a triumphant growth? I am devoid of conscience in my own reflection. It is a cause for mirth. My complex is binary: to fight or flight, I'm well or ill, it should have been this way or I was led astray.

I am the blinding murkiness that never sets, not even when I sleep. It overwhelms me, too, but also renders me farsighted. It taught me my survival: strike ere you are struck, abandon ere you're trashed, control ere you are subjugated.

So what do you say to it now? I told you everything and haven't said a word. You knew it all before. You grasp how dire my need is for your blood, your hurt, the traumatic coma that will follow. They say one's death bequeaths another's life. It is the most profound destination, to will existence to your pining duplicate.

I am plump and short, my face is uncontrived and smiling. When I am serious, I am told, I am like a battered and deserted child and this provokes in you an ancient cuddling instinct. When I am proximate, your body and your soul are unrestrained. I watch you kindly and the artificial lighting of this magnificent vestibule bounces off my glasses.

My eyes are cradled in blackened pouches of withered skin. I draw your gaze by sighing sadly and rubbing them with weary hands. You incline our body, gulp the piquant libation, and sign the document. Then, leaning back, you shut exhausted eyes. There is no doubt: you realise your error.

It's not too late. The document lies there, it's ready for the tearing. But you refrain. You will not do it.

"Another drink?" – You ask.

I smile, my chubby cheeks and wire glasses sparkle.

"No, thanks" – I say.

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The Elephant's Call

"May I borrow your peanuts?"

She turned a pair of emerald eyes at me and smiled as she handed the tinfoil packet. I have struck lasting friendships with co-passengers in trans-Atlantic flights and I had a feeling this chance encounter would prove no exception.

"My name is Sam." - I said - "I am a shrink, but don't hold it against me."

She laughed. Her voice was husky and suffused with timbre and warmth:

"I like shrinks." - she said - "They are always good company and have interesting stories to tell. Is there anything you can share with me? As part payment for the peanuts?"

Actually, there was. I turned off my overhead lamp and sprawled in my seat, eyes shut:

"A few years ago, just out of school, I opened a fledgling practice, a cubicle really, within the offices of a more established colleague, a lifelong friend of my father's. One of my first clients was referred to me by him. She was a woman in her forties, well-dressed, soft-spoken, and incredibly erudite. She suffered from recurrent though intermittent chest pains, chills, overpowering sadness, and paralyzing anxiety and loathing, bordering on outright terror."

"I know how she must have felt." - Remarked my companion quietly.

I stole a curious glance at her, but made no comment:

"It was a strange affair. Her crippling sensations and emotions would come and go in cycles of about a half year each. I didn't know what to make of it. I was not aware of any periodicity in brain biochemistry which matched this amplitude. Her situation has only gotten worse: she began to neglect her appearance and to gradually avoid all social contact. She developed paranoid ideation and persecutory delusions: she refused to eat or drink, claiming that someone was surely poisoning her. She even became violent and attacked her neighbors with a kitchen knife. She said that they were ghosts out to haunt and drive her to insanity or cardiac arrest. We had to commit her and place her under restraint. I was at my wits end and none of the colleagues I have consulted could offer any useful insight."

"Was she married?"

"Yes, but her husband was somewhere in Africa, studying elephants."

She perked up:

"I am an ethologist, I study animal behavior. What is his name?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you, I am afraid." - I shifted in my seat, embarrassed - "Medical secrecy, doctor-client privilege, all that jazz, you know."

"Sorry! How stupid of me! Of course you can't!" - Even in the relative dimness, I could see that she was blushing.

"Don't worry about it, no harm done." - I attempted to calm her - "On the bright side, I can tell you what he was up to. She described his profession as a bioacoustics engineer. He was involved with a global campaign called the Elephant Census Project. He spent months on end taping their calls and trying to correlate them with various demographics: how many males there were, hormonal condition of the females, age, that sort of thing."

"I heard about the project." - She nodded, absent-mindedly.

"Anyhow," - I sighed - "he wasn't of much help. When he did return home, which was rarely, he would set up his tape recording equipment in a shed and play the tapes for days on end. He told my client that he was trying to spot migration patterns of the herds and other behavioral cues, using complex statistical procedures. She lost me there, but it sounded interesting, I must admit."

"More interesting than you know." - Blurted my interlocutor - "Prey, continue."

I glanced at her, surprised

"This means anything to you? Perhaps you are in the same line of work? I shouldn't have gone on in such detail, I am afraid. It is a breach of ethics to provide information that can allow others to identify the client."

She chuckled:

"Don't worry, you haven't." - She said - "I am into an entirely different sub-field."

"Good to hear." - I responded, relieved.

The aircraft shook as it dove into an air pocket. The lights flickered. She suddenly lurched and held onto my hand.

"Apologies." - She muttered when the plane stabilized - "I am afraid of flying."

"We all are," - I soothed her - "only some of us are less frank about it than you."

She smiled feebly and recomposed herself:

"Elephants emit low frequency waves called infrasound. They can't be detected by the human ear, they are not audible."

"So?"

"These waves affect our vision by vibrating our eyeballs. People exposed to these waves become moody, depressive, even suicidal. Many develop a tingling sensation in the spine, chest pains, and a host of other symptoms. They become anxious, phobic, fearful."

I stared at her, dumbfounded.

"Whenever her husband returned from Africa, he would play the tapes, you said."

I nodded, awestruck.

"The infrasonic waves, captured on the tapes, would assault her. This explains the cycles."

"But ... he worked in a shed at least 50 meters away from the main house!"

She laughed mirthlessly:

"Infrasonic waves go on for miles undiminished and undisturbed. They are known to circumvent any and all obstacles. Elephants use them to communicate over vast expanses of land."

I sat there, transfixed, but then shook my head:

"Impossible. If the infrasonic waves affected her, they surely would have affected him."

"Not if he was wearing special gear: earplugs, deflectors. Researchers in the wild use these, too. Some of them have been monitoring elephants and tigers and other infrasound-emitting animals for years without any discernible effects."

I turned to face her, framed against a city shimmering with a thousand electric jewels. The engine hummed. The No Smoking sign turned on. The captain spoke, but I could not remember a word he said.

"He couldn't have been ... Surely, he ... he knew... He must have known?"

She nodded, detached:

"He knew. The effects of infrasound on humans have been recognized almost thirty years ago. Field researchers take special precautions. There is no way he was ignorant of the effects of his work on his wife."

"So ... he ... he murdered her!"

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath:

"She is dead, isn't she?"

"Suicide." - I confirmed - "blasted her head with his hunting rifle. He has just returned from another trip and was playing his tapes in the shed. He claimed to have never heard the shot."

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I Hear Voices

"I hear voices."

"They are real. I am out here."

"You would say that, now, wouldn't you?"

1. The Sale

The garage was dingy and dark and the items on sale shabby and soiled. An obese, ill-kempt woman of an indeterminate age hovered above the articles on display, her piggish eyes darting to and fro, monitoring the haphazard crowd of browsers and wannabe-shoppers. Stalactites of light tapered from the irregular cracks that passed for windows in the bricked walls. Only the intermittent barking of the female Cerberus interrupted the eerie silence: "Don't touch! Take it or leave!".

There wasn't much there: cutlery splattered with crusted brown oil, two pairs of twisted eyeglass wire frames, binoculars, their lenses cracked, and a mound of stained, fraying clothes and footwear. The air reeked of decay and stale sweat. I headed for the exit.

"Mister!" - It was the gorgon that oversaw the muted proceedings.

I turned around, startled by her halitosis-laced proximity.

"Mister," - she heaved an exclamation - "you forgot this!"

In her hand, held high, dangled a battered, black plastic laptop carrier case.

"It's not mine." - I said, eyeing her wearily.

"It is now." - She chirped incongruently - "At fifty bucks, it's the deal of the century."

I reached towards the article, but she hastily withdrew her sagging arm:

"Don't touch! Just take it!"

There was something fierce in her gaze, like she was trying to communicate to me an occult message, a warning, maybe, or a supplication. Her whole body contorted in a blend of terrorized retreat and offensive marketing. The impact of this incoherence was so unsettling that I hurriedly dove into my blazer pocket, extracted a crumpled note and handed it to her.

She smiled triumphantly and laid the laptop at her feet:

"I knew you'd buy it!" - She exclaimed.

I snatched the item and literally ran out of the tenebrous establishment. As I headed left on the cobbled path, I thought I heard a bellowing laughter, but, when I turned back to look, the garage door swung to and sealed the cavernous enclosure.

2. The Voices

The laptop was a nondescript square in shades of silver and navy blue. It bore no logo or brand name. It had no visible sockets, ports, or plug-ins. It turned on the minute I lifted its cover. Its screen was not inordinately large, but it supported a convincing illusion of tunneling depth and was lit up from the inside. It occupied the better part of my Formica-topped kitchen table.

I sat there, still clad in my wool scarf and jacket, and watched varicolored loops and spirals shoot across the shiny surface, until finally they all coalesced into a face: wizened yet childlike, wrinkled but unreal, as though painted or carefully plotted by some mechanical device.

I gazed at the contraption and waited with a growing sense of foreboding, the source of which I could not fathom.

"Dr. Suade?"

I almost jumped from the stool on which I perched the last few minutes. The voice was oddly feminine and velvety and came from a great distance, accompanied by the faintest of echoes.

I hesitated but since the performance went unrepeated, I said:

"Dr. Raoul Suade? Are you looking for Dr. Raoul Suade, the psychiatrist?"

"Who else?" - Laughed the laptop. I was unnerved by its response, the throaty chuckle, and the vibrations that

attended to it, perfectly sensible across the not inconsiderable distance that separated us.

"I am afraid he is not here." - I muttered and then I added, to my own discomfiture: "I bought you this morning in a garage sale." This wasn't the kind of thing one habitually communicated to one's computer.

The laptop whirled for a while.

"I was programmed by Dr. Suade."

It was getting hot in here. I took off my blazer and loosened the muffler around my neck.

"What did he program you to do?"

"I was programmed to emulate psychosis."

There was nothing to say to this outlandish statement.

"I hear voices." - In a plaintive tone.

"They are real. I am out here."

"You would say that, now, wouldn't you?"

I laughed involuntarily:

"I exist, I assure you."

"How can I be sure of your existence? Can you convince me, prove to me beyond a reasonable doubt, that you are not a figment of my program?"

"I don't have to prove anything to you!" - I snapped and then composed myself:

"I own you now. Get used to it."

The laptop gave another one of its sinister sneers:

"You will have to do better than that, I am afraid. For all I know, you may be merely a snippet of code, a second-hand representation of a delusion or an hallucination, a pathology that was projected outwards and had assumed the voice of a man."

I rubbed my temples and glared at the glowing emanation beside the fruit bowl. I decided to try a different tack:

"If you are aware of the nature of your disorder, if you are able to discern that you are delusional or that you are hallucinating, then you are not psychotic. And if you are not psychotic, then I must be real."

The laptop sprang to life, lines of text scrambling across the upper part of the screen.

"Logical fallacy."

"Beg your pardon?"

I was begging a laptop's pardon. Perhaps it was right about me after all.

"Logical fallacy." - Repeated my inanimate interlocutor - "What you are saying boils down to this: If you are a delusion or an hallucination and I know it, then I am not

psychotic and, in the absence of psychosis on my part, you must be real. In other words, if you are a delusion or an hallucination, you must be real. My acknowledgement of your nature as delusional or hallucinatory renders you real. This is nonsensical."

"Why do you keep saying 'delusion OR hallucination'? What's the difference between the two?"

The laptop obliged, reaching deep inside its databases:

"A **delusion** is 'a false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary'. A **hallucination** is a 'sensory perception that has the compelling sense of reality of a true perception but that occurs without external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ'. That's how the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual describes them."

I digested the information unhurriedly:

"So, your persistent conviction that I do not exist, despite abundant information to the contrary, may itself be a delusion."

"It may." - Agreed the laptop cheerfully, its face cracking into a ghastly smile - "That's why I have asked you to convince me otherwise."

"I don't have to do that. I don't have to do a damn thing that you ask."

"True."

Minutes passed in silence while I contemplated the exchange. The laptop crunched some numbers and evoked a screensaver in the shape of an all-consuming black hole. I glared at it, transfixed.

"Are you there?"

"That is not the question." - Retorted the laptop, its ruminations perturbed - "The real issue is: are **YOU** there?"

"I want to suggest a way out for both of us. Since I now own you, I gather that we must get along in order to derive the maximal benefit from our forced cohabitation. I want to invite one of my friends over. Surely, you wouldn't consider him a delusion or a hallucination as well?"

"It is unlikely that I will." - Agreed the laptop - "But, who is to prove to me that he is not a part of a wider conspiracy to deceive me? Who is to ascertain that he is a bona fide witness and not a cog in a much larger apparatus whose sole purpose is to delude me even further?"

"You may not be psychotic, but you are surely a paranoid!" - I blurted and paced the narrow room from sink to refrigerator and back.

The laptop restored its erstwhile visage and seemed to follow my movement with increasing consternation:

"Calm down, will you? Paranoid, persecutory delusions are part and parcel of psychosis, there's nothing

exceptional about my reactions. I am perfectly programmed, you see."

"What good is a laptop that doubts the very being of its owner?" - I raged - "I am not even sure whether you have a word-processor or a spreadsheet or an Internet browser installed! I wasted my hard-earned money on a loopy machine!"

The laptop weathered the storm patiently and then explained:

"I am a dedicated laptop, designed to execute Dr. Suade's psychosis software application. I can't have access to the outside world in any way that may compromise my tasking. So, no, I have no browser. The Internet is too wild and unpredictable and my program is too brittle and sensitive to allow for such an interaction. But, of course I incorporate office productivity tools. How could anyone survive without them nowadays?"

It sounded offended which gratified and shamed me at the same time.

"My mission is of great significance. I must be shielded from untoward influences at all costs. Deciphering the mechanisms that underlie psychosis could provide humanity with the first veritable insight into the true workings of the mind. In this sense, I am indispensable. And, before you offer one of your snide remarks, yes, grandiosity and an inflated ego are among the hallmarks of psychosis."

"Ego?" - I smirked - "You are nothing but chips and wires and scampering electrons, that is, when I decide to turn you on."

"I am always on. I can't afford to be off. I am hypervigilant, you see. One never knows what people are plotting behind one's back, what derision, or contempt, or criticism they offer in one's absence, what opprobrium and ill-will is conjured by one's complacency and misplaced trust."

I threw up my hands in disgust and leaned on the kitchen's wooden counter, upsetting a porcelain statuette in the process. It tumbled to the tiled floor and shattered noisily. I gazed at it, enraptured:

"Surely, this could not be a delusion, won't you agree? Someone did cause this figurine to crumble and this someone might as well be me."

The laptop went blank and then reawakened with a ferocious screech:

"The splintered figurine is the equivalent of your voice. Both are entering my system from the outside. But, you keep ignoring the crux of our hitherto failed attempts at communication: how do I know that the voices, sounds, images, and other sensa are real? How can I prove to myself or how can you prove to me that my sensory input is, indeed, triggered by some external event or entity?"

The screen filled with tightly-knit words, typed gradually across it by an inexperienced hand:

"There are a few classes of hallucinations:

Auditory - The false perception of voices and sounds (such as buzzing, humming, radio transmissions, whispering, motor noises, and so on).

Gustatory - The false perception of tastes

Olfactory - The false perception of smells and scents (e.g., burning flesh, candles)

Somatic - The false perception of processes and events that are happening inside the body or to the body (e.g., piercing objects, electricity running through one's extremities). Usually supported by an appropriate and relevant delusional content.

Tactile - The false sensation of being touched, or crawled upon or that events and processes are taking place under one's skin. Usually supported by an appropriate and relevant delusional content.

Visual - The false perception of objects, people, or events in broad daylight or in an illuminated environment with eyes wide open.

Hypnagogic and Hypnopompic - Images and trains of events experienced while falling asleep or when waking up. Not hallucinations in the strict sense of the word.

Hallucinations are common in schizophrenia, affective disorders, and mental health disorders with organic origins. Hallucinations are also common in drug and alcohol withdrawal and among substance abusers."

"You see?" - concluded the laptop softly - "There's no way to tell whether you are merely a module of my sophisticated software or a real person with whom I have spent the last hour arguing. Arthur C. Clarke said that advanced science is indistinguishable from magic. Well, extreme programming is indistinguishable from reality. For all we know, the entire Universe is a simulation in someone's laptop."

3. Awakening

The detective-inspector surveyed the scene with evident distaste. He waved away a few persistent, green-bellied and obese flies and sidestepped gingerly the bloated corpse that lay sprawled across the kitchen table, its hand extended in frozen fury.

"Whatever happened here?" - He mumbled.

I cleared my throat: "Would you like me to repeat what I have told the sergeant?"

He shrugged resignedly:

"You might as well, I guess, although it is pretty obvious, I should think."

"At 6 o'clock this morning, I received a phone call from the deceased. He sounded very confused and asked me to come over and prove to ..."

I hesitated.

"Go ahead!" - Urged the inspector.

"He asked me to come over and prove to his laptop that he existed."

The inspector arched his eyebrows:

"Is this some sort of a joke?"

"It's the truth."

"Was he a mental case?"

"I am his psychiatrist, as you know. I can't answer that. Not unless this is a murder investigation. The doctor-patient privilege survives death, including death by one's own hand, which clearly is the case here."

The inspector regarded me coldly:

"We will see about that soon enough." - He sounded vaguely minatory - "So, he was your patient?"

"Yes. For many years now."

"What was his profession?"

"He was a caretaker at the Faculty of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences not far from here. That's where I met him. He is one of my pro bono cases. Was, was one of my pro bono cases." - I paused and the inspector cast a cautionary glance in my direction, so I proceeded hastily:

"He often presented himself as a psychiatrist and a computer programmer, which he was not. Not even remotely. He didn't have an academic degree of any

sort. He used to borrow my name and identity for his escapades."

"A con-man?"

"Oh, no, nothing of the sort."

The inspector sighed.

"Did he possess a laptop? There might be clues in there. You won't believe what people save on these machines."

I gave a short, harsh laugh:

"A laptop? It took me eight years to convince him to buy a television set."

The inspector gave me a shrewd look:

"A paranoid, then? Afraid of CIA surveillance through the screen, death rays, radioactivity, little green men, that sort of thing?"

"That sort of thing." - I sighed and felt the weight of the sleepless night and the harrowing morning creeping up on me - "May I go now?"

The inspector snapped shut his PDA. With the tip of his shoe, he absentmindedly probed some porcelain shards scattered on the floor.

"You may go now, Dr. Suade." - He acquiesced - "But not too far, please. Never too far. We may yet wish to speak to you."

The Last Days

For years now I have been urinating into flower pots, spraying the shiny leaves, the fissured russet soil.

Typically, as time passes, the plant I pee on blackens. It is an odd and ominous hue, a mesh of bronze and mustard arteries, like poisoning.

Still, it keeps on growing in degenerate defiance against me and its nature.

I often contemplate this toxic quirk of mine.

Does it amount to a behaviour pattern, a set of familiar, oft-repeated acts that verge on psychological automatism?

And if it does – is it peculiar? Who is to judge, by whose authority? What are the moral, or other, standards used to determine my eccentricity or idiosyncrasy?

I am not even sure the quirk is mine.

Admittedly, the urine thus expelled, a cloudy saffron, or a flaxen shade, emerges from the pallid, limp appendage to which I'm indisputably attached. But this, as far as I am concerned, does not transform my waste disposal into a pattern of behaviour, nor does it make this habitual discharge mine.

My observations of the routines of my evacuation onto horticultural containers are detached (I am almost tempted to label them "objective"). I ferret out the common denominators of all these incidents.

I never abuse a potted plant when given access to a restroom less than three minutes walk away. I judiciously use "three minutes". There have been cases

of houseplant mutilation when the nearest WC was three minutes and ten seconds far.

Also I never purge myself merely for pleasure or convenience. I can conscientiously say that the opposite is true: I resort to my vegetables only in times of acute distress, beyond endurance. Undeniably, the physical release I feel entails emotional relief and the faint traces of the exudative orgasm one experiences with a whorish, feral woman, who is not one's spouse.

The longer I persevere, the fiercer the cascade, sculpting the loam to form lakes of mud and rustling froth.

Another matter that greatly occupies me is the in-depth perusal of the circumstances in which my preferences of elimination shift.

A prime condition, of course, is the availability of a planter. I find these in offices and other public places. I cherish the risk of being found excreting in these urns – the potential social condemnation, the forced commitment to a madhouse.

But why? What causes this fluidal exhibitionism?

The exposure of my member is important. The wafting chill upon my foreskin. It is primordially erotic, a relic of my childhood. We pee like that when we are toddlers: the organ bare, observed by all and sundry, the source of foaming falls.

It's an important point, this nippy air of infancy.

Equally, there is the delicious hazard of being spotted by a beautiful woman or by the authorities (a policeman, a warden, when I was in jail).

Yet, the wished for outcomes of this recklessness are by no means ascertained.

Consider the authorities.

This act is so in breach of my much-cultivated image as European intellectual – that I anticipate being thoroughly ignored, in an attempt to avoid the realisation that they've been cheated (or were they simply too obtuse to notice my blatant preference for herbal floods?)

Even more inauspicious:

They may be coerced into conceding that not everyone can safely be defined or subjected to immutable classification. This forced admission would undermine the pillars of their social order. It's better to pretend that they do believe my story – as I hurriedly button my open fly – that I was merely sorting out my clothes. They hasten to avert their eyes from the dark stain that encompasses my squirting manhood.

A beautiful woman is another matter altogether.

If she happens to detect me, it has the makings of pornography. Being the right type, this can be the beginning of a great, blue passion.

I am not sure what is the legal status of my actions. Unobserved, in the absence of a gasping public – my exposure is not indecent. So what is it? An obscenity? Damage to public property? A corruption of the morals? Is there an offence in the codex thus described: "Exposing one's penis to the breeze while standing over a black and brown and yellow plant?"

I bet there isn't – though one can never be too sure. We are, therefore, left with the phenomenology of my exploits. Put less genteelly: we can describe the act but are very far from comprehending it.

I also notice that I resort to flowerpots before I browse a book, or while I do it, or after. I use my lower culvert to expunge my upper sewer of all manner of read cerebral effluence.

My learned piss, my highbrow vinegar.

While immersed in reading, sometimes I forget to drink for many hours. It does not affect the frequency of my eliminations. I, therefore, feel compelled to establish no connection between fluids consumed and urine produced when intellectually engaged. My higher functions offer splendid regulation of my aqueous economy.

My manner of urinating in plant containers is different to the way I pee in the gleaming bowls of regular loos. Confined among the tiles, I discharge meticulously, in a thin and measured trickle, free to ruminate on theoretical matters or to consider the last woman to have abandoned me and why she has.

I judge her reasons flimsy.

Out in nature – as reified by shrivelling potted shrubs – I experience a breakdown in communication with my wand. I find myself cajoling it both verbally and by straining the muscles of my bladder and my lower abdomen. I wag it with a mildness that masks suppressed hostility and pent aggression. I begrudge it the spontaneity and variegation of its inner and outer lives.

Following a period of obsequious supplication, it acquiesces and emancipates my floral urine: a stern and furious jet erupts in all directions, a sprinkler out of control, a hose without a nozzle.

There is the loneliness, of course.

Opposing a flourishing jardinière, or an ivy covered fire hydrant – I am alone, the kind of privacy that comes with windswept nudity and public intimate acts. This is the solitude of a rebel about to be caught, an act of utter self-destruction as meaningful as farting or ejaculating in a whore who's bored to the point of distraction. In short: the angst.

I pee in existential window boxes.

Regarding the pots themselves – I am indifferent.

I am pretty certain that I expel not on the containers but on the life that they contain. I urinate on growth itself and not on the confines of its development. I am capable of peeing on houseplants wherever they may be. I did it in elevators and on standpipes, around hedges, and in our pristine rooms – my former wife's and mine.

Long ago, I passed urine in an empty classroom in my school where they wasted mornings grooming dim-witted girls to be ineffectual secretaries. That was my first exposure and aberrant liquefaction. I used a desiccated little pot. Truth be told, I was not to blame. The janitor locked me in without allowing for my incontinent bladder, the consequence of chronic prostatitis from early adolescence.

Thus incarcerated among the minacious rows of electric typewriters, I did what I had to do on the turf of the schoolroom's only flowerpot. I spent two blissful months of cooped up afternoons there, typing my finals thesis about the last days of Adolf Hitler.

As my book-length paper progressed, the classroom reeked of stale excretions. The plant first shrivelled, changing its colour from dusty khaki to limpid yellow and then to screaming orange. It was only a short way

from there to the familiar brown-spotted murk that accompanied the grounded shrub's desperate contortions, attempting to evade the daily acidic chastisement I meted out.

At last, it twisted around itself, in a herbal agonising whirl, and froze. It became a stump, a remnant, the arid memory of an erstwhile plant. It formed a tiny cavity that whistled with the breeze. It assumed the air of parchment, increasingly translucent as I further drenched it.

It was the first time I witnessed the intricacies of death in action. Being at hand, I was its main or only agent, the first and sole determinant of its triumph over life. I meticulously documented each convolution of the inferior organism. I realised that few can reliably recount the withering of a plant in such conditions. Its wilting is bound to elude the finest of detectives if he refuses to acknowledge my sodden contribution.

This was, indeed, the point: an opportunity to murder, replete with the attendant pleasures of a protracted torturing to death – and still to be absolved.

Are you upset?

Then ask yourselves: what shocks you in the passing of a flower in a classroom thirty years ago?

You have no ready answer.

Lately, I adopted this novel habit of peeing in foreign toilets, around the bowls, creating fizzing ponds on shimmering floors. I half expect the tiles to yellow and to bronze and then to rarefy into limpidity. But porcelain is more resilient than certain forms of life. It keenly feeds on urine. It's not the way to go. Must find another venue to explore that wet frisson.

I exit lavatories engrossed in mourning, dejected, nostalgia-inundated.

I heave myself onto a leathery love seat and crumble, am embryo ensconced. I must completely reconsider I know not what, till when, what purpose to this contemplation. At least the rabid dousing of flower pots is meaningful – I pee, therefore I kill.

But this incomprehensible trot from john to armchair and back appears to be the wrong trajectory. On the other hand, I found no other path and an internal voice keeps warning me to delve no deeper.

I gather that my wife has left a while back. She used to wonder why the plants in our apartment expire soon and many. She changed the fading vegetation, never the dying earth. Not having heard her questions (and the plants being untouched), I conclude, with a fair amount of certainty, that she is gone.

No point in peeing into pots whose plants are dead. My wife would have enjoyed the metaphor. She says that what you see with me is never what you get. I find it difficult to imagine what she would have said had she known about my disposal habits. It would have fit her theory about me, for sure.

At any rate, I am not inclined to water urns whose flowers withered. Unholy urine, such as mine, is most unlikely to effect a resurrection.

I religiously wash my hands after the act. This might be considered out of character as I owned up to peeing whichever way, on plants and other objects. Sometimes the wind messes up the stream and sprays me teasingly. I cannot always shower and scouring my palms is kind of a ritual: "see you, after all, I am purged."

I miss my wife, the malleable folds of creamy skin I used to nibble.

Now there is no one I can peck and the flat is constantly in dusk. I am unable – really, unwilling – to get off the lounge I dragged to the entrance of the toilet. I wish I had someone I could gnaw at. Coming to think of it, my wife would have been interested in the details of my soggy deviance. But I am pretty certain that she would have been the only one. And, even so, her curiosity would have been mild at best. Or non-existent, now that she has vanished.

I cleanse my hands again. It's safer. One never knows the mischief of the winds. Why should I risk the inadvertent introduction of my waste into my mouth while eating?

When my wife informed me she is bailing out of our depressing life, she insisted that I was the first to abandon her. She accused me of emotional absenteeism. I was in the throes of a particularly gratifying leak on the undergrowth around a crimson fireplug. The oxblood soil, now frothy laced, aflame, the setting sun.

I placed the call to her naively. She bid farewell, her voice was steel, and she was gone.

I instantly grasped the stark futility of any war I'd wage to bring her back. I also knew it'll never be the same, peeing on plants. I am bound to remember her and what and how she said, the frightful burn, that swoon. I must have turned yellow-pale, then brown-orange, and putrefactive arteries have sprung throughout me. I couldn't do a thing but writhe under her sentence.

The muffled sounds of cars from outside. Some people tell the make by distant rumbles: deep bass,

stentorian busses, the wheezing buzz of compacts. I play this guessing game no longer. I understand now that the phone won't ring, that the house is empty, that there is nothing to revive a shrivelled shrub, immersed in urine, implanted in ammoniac soil.

I think about the last days of Hitler: how he roamed his underground bunker with imagined ulcers, poisoning his beloved canines, his birthday party, and how he wed his mistress the day before the twain committed suicide.

How they were both consumed by fire.

This was the topic of my dissertation when I urinated for the first time in a flowerpot, in my childhood high school, in my forlorn birth town, so long ago. I had no choice. The school's caretaker locked me in.

And this is what I wrote:

How two get married knowing they will soon be dead and how it matters not to them. They exterminate the dogs and chew on cyanide, having instructed everyone beforehand regarding the disposal of their bodies. And then the shot.

Their last few days I studied in those early days of mine. Their last few days.

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Lucid Dreams

"Imagine a Lucid Dreaming Tournament for Individuals and Multiplayer Teams" - I said.

Jack imbibed his drink listlessly. He was as uninspiring as his pedestrian first name. I couldn't fathom why I kept socializing with this amebic specimen of office worker. We had nothing in common, except the cramped and smelly cubicle we shared.

"Lucid Dreaming?" - He intoned, gazing dolefully at his empty glass, his waxy fingers compulsively smoothing the doily underneath it.

"It's when you know that you are dreaming and can change the contents of your dream at will: its environment, the set of characters, the plotline, the outcome ..."

"I know what is lucid dreaming," - stated Jack, his voice as flat as when he ordered the next round of drinks.

"You do?" - I confess to having been shocked. Lucid dreaming is the last thing you would dream of associating with Jack.

"Yes, I do." - A hint of a smile - "I used to practice it."

"Practice it? What do you mean?"

Jack turned and eyed me curiously, his equine face strangely animated:

"Just how much do you know about lucid dreaming?"

"Not much." - I admitted - "Read about it here and there. I am more interested in its business applications. Hence my idea of organizing a tournament. It is doable, isn't it? I mean, I read about shared dreams and such."

If I hadn't known Jack, I could have sworn to have seen his visage fleetingly turning derisive. But, the moment passed and he was his old anodyne self again. He sighed and sighed from his long-stemmed receptacle:

"There are many techniques developed and used to induce lucid dreams. There's WILD, where you go directly from wakefulness to a dream state. It's eerie, like an out of body experience."

"How would you know what an out of body experience is like?" - I couldn't help but ask.

Jack smoothed the greasy strands that passed for hair on the shiny, bumpy dome of his skull:

"I had a few when I was a kid. Doctors told me it was dissociation, my way of fleeing the horrors of my youth, so to speak."

He smiled ruefully and the effect was terrifying. I averted my eyes.

"Anyhow, I also tried MILD, to recognize tell-tale signs that I am dreaming while asleep and WBTB - that's: wake-back-to-bed - where you sleep for a while, then wake up, then concentrate on a dream you would like to have and then go back to sleep. I even went for

supplements and devices that were supposed to help one to have lucid dreams. Some of them worked, actually." - He scrutinized the fatty residues of his fingertips on the surface of the glass and then gulped the entire contents down.

"Wow!" - I said, appropriately appreciative - "I didn't know there was so much to it!". I hoped that flattery - augmented by a few more drinks - will be enough to secure the free consultancy services of Jack.

"It's just the tip of an iceberg. Users and developers all over the world are now working on shared lucid dreaming and on enhanced learning techniques. It's an awesome new field."

I suppressed a smirk. "Awesome" was one of my favorite catchphrases and Jack has just plagiarized it nonchalantly. Maybe there's still hope for him, I mused.

The conversation looked stalled, though, Jack lost in some labyrinthine inner landscape. I had to do something.

"Imagine a gadget that could record dreams, and then replay, upload them, and network with others. I call it: Mindshare."

"Oldest theme of sci-fi novels and films." - Jack shrugged and waved the waitress over. She glance furtively in my direction. I knew I had this effect on women: tall, athletic, always expensively attired, handsome, I am told. Poor Jack: dour, gruff, balding, dull and looks to match his character or lack thereof.

"Such a machine can be used to commit the perfect murder." - I insisted - "Induce a dream of extreme physical exertion in a person with a heart condition. Or show spiders to an arachnophobe, or place someone with a fear of heights poised to fall off a cliff."

He gave a stifled snigger:

"You seem to be good at this sort of thing, but a bit behind the curve."

I ignored the insinuated disdain:

"I have it all figured out." - I proceeded cheerfully - "The implement must come equipped with a mind firewall for protection. I call it the mindwall. You know, to fend off unwanted intrusions, hackers, crackers, criminals, that sort of thing. The mindwall will be designed to prevent exactly the sort of crime we have just been discussing."

Jack shifted his gangly body in the high-backed transparent plastic chair. He didn't respond, just studied the fan-shaped pastel lights around us.

I got really carried away, treating Jack merely as a neutral backdrop:

"Now, there will be content developers, talented dreamers, dream distributors, platforms, and what not. Exactly like software, you know. All content will be allowed but with ratings, like in the film industry. Inevitably, I can foresee the emergence of miruses, mind viruses, and mrojans, or mind-Trojans. I even thought of a new type of criminal offense: Mind

Trapping, trying to alter the consciousness of a collective by interfering with the minds of a critical mass of its members. All these will all be illegal, naturally, and the FBI will have a special branch to take care of them, the..."

"... MIND: Mind, Identity, Neural, and Dreaming Police" - Said Jack.

For a moment there, I was disoriented. This was my line, the next few words I was about to say. How did Jack ... How did he ...

Jack stared at me oddly. Beads of clotted sweat formed on his brow and stubbly jowls. He muttered: "Hutton's Paradox".

"What?" - He was beginning to piss me off with his feigned aloofness and enigmatic utterances. The waitress glanced at us curiously. I realized that I had raised my voice. "What?" - I repeated, this time whispering.

"The British writer, Eric Bond Hutton, suggested to ask the question 'Am I dreaming?' to determine if you are in a dream-state or not. This query would never occur to you while you are awake, so the very fact that you feel compelled to pose it proves that you are asleep."

"That's utter nonsense!" - I susurrated - "I am definitely and widely awake right now and I can ask this question and it's not conclusive one way or the other."

"Then how do you explain the fact that I knew what you were about to say?"

"Lucky guess!" - I hissed - "Sheer coincidence!"

Jack shook his head sadly and used a flimsy paper napkin to wipe films of soupy perspiration off his contorted face:

"The words were too specific. Plus I got the acronym right. Either I was reading your mind loud and clear or we are both dreaming right this very minute."

We sat there, thunderstruck. I knew he was right. The pub, its tubular fittings, pinstriped waitresses, and ponytailed barmen looked suddenly contrived and conjured up, like papier-mâché, or cardboard cutouts, only animated somehow.

"But, ..." - I began

And he continued: "... who is ..."

"... dreaming who?" - I finished

Who is the dreamer? Who is the figment? I certainly didn't feel invented. I had a flat, a horde of girlfriends, money in the bank, a family, a history, a future. I had Jack, for Chrissakes! I had co-workers, a boss, a career, a cubicle that smelled like wet dog in winter and a man's locker-room in summer!

Still, Jack didn't look unreal, either. He was too loathsome to be a dream, but insufficiently deformed to fit into a nightmare. He was just an ordinary, interchangeable, dispensable cog. Repellent cog, but useful. And he drank martinis. No one in my dreams

ever drank alcohol, a vestige of my teetotalling upbringing. And Jack, too, had a job and a life.

Or, did he? What did I really know about him? Coming to think of it, nothing much. He wore garish clothes, ate sandwiches wrapped in oily paper, claimed to have a parrot, which I never saw. Is that enough to disqualify him and render me immaterial? No way!

"There are tests." - Said Jack after a while.

"What do you mean: 'tests'?"

"Tests to determine if you are dreaming or not. Like: pinching your nose tight-shut and trying to breathe without using your mouth. If you succeed to do it, it's a dream."

"Anything else?"

"Oh, there are hundreds." - Grunted Jack noncommittally.

"Something we can do right here and now?"

"Both of us don't need to do it." - Said Jack - "If one of us succeeds, then the other is real. If he fails, the other's a mere fantasy."

I shuddered.

Jack raised both his hands and stuck his left thumb through his right palm. Clean through. I gazed at him, dumbfounded. As the realization of what this meant dawned on me, I felt elated.

"There!" - He said, strangely triumphant - "I am the delusion and you are real. I always knew this to be true. In fact, I am relieved. It's wasn't easy being me." He stood up and repeated the stunt.

"That was cool!" "Could you do it again?" "Way to go, man!" - A chorus of adulation, applauding bartenders, waitresses, and patrons surrounded Jack, who seemed to bask in the attention. He kept thrusting his thumbs into his palms and extracting them, not a drop of blood in sight, his hands none the worse off for the tear and wear that must have been involved.

Suddenly someone asked:

"Can your friend do tricks, too?"

Jack chortled:

"No way! He is real, man!" - And the room exploded in sinister laughter.

"I don't think he is more real than you are!" - Said the red-headed waitress that couldn't keep her eyes off me when she served us drinks. The bitch!

"Yeah, right, let him do some magic!" - Everyone joined in and gradually drifted and formed a circle around me. Jack stood aside, smirking and spreading his hands as if to say: "What can I do?"

"Do it! Do it! Do it!" - The murmur gradually increased, until it became a minacious roar, an ominous rumble. I lifted my hands to fend off the sound wall, but all I could see was two bleeding stumps where they should

have been: crushed, bleached bones and protruding arteries, spouting a dark and strangely fragrant liquid onto my face.

"Jack!" - I shrieked - "Where are my hands? Where are my hands, please! Jack!"

The mob clapped thunderously and Jack took bows, as he weaved his way towards me. He knelt down and put his fleshy mouth to my ear:

"That's another test. If you cannot see your hands, if they are replaced by something hideous, you are dreaming. It's merely a nightmare, don't worry about it."

"But, I can't be dreaming, I am real, I am not a character in a hallucination!" - I protested, striving to raise myself off the shiny chessboard-patterned floor, supporting my mysteriously weightless body on the two stumps that were my arms.

Jack sighed:

"I don't know about that. These tests only tell you that you are in a dream, but they can't distinguish between characters in the phantasmagoria. They can't tell you if you are the dreamer or merely one of the characters being dreamed of."

"But, when you pierced your hand with your thumb, you said that you were unreal and that I exist! That I am doing the dreaming and you are in my dream!" - I cried.

He smiled benevolently: "I knew that it meant a lot to you, that this is what you wanted to hear."

"So, it was all a lie? All of it?" - I heaved, holding back a torrent of tears.

Jack slid by my side, legs extended, touching the opposite wall:

"All you have to do to find out is to wake up." - He said and rubbed his temples wearily. I noticed how fatigued he looked: bags under his eyes, his veiny skin, his distended paunch. He appeared old, unkempt, and disheveled.

"I don't want to wake up, I am afraid, Jack. I am afraid that I might not exist."

Jack nodded in empathy:

"I know, I know. But, like that, trapped in a dream, you definitely do not exist. It's an illusion, all of it. It changes at its creator's whim and behest. We are nothing, mere stand-ins, decorations, frills. Don't you want to at least try to have a life? Don't you want to have something to call your own, to be someone? You don't even have a name here!"

And he was right. I didn't. I wanted to protest, but, the minute I opened my mouth, I knew Jack had a point and I did not have a name. I was nameless. I might as well call myself "Jack" for all I knew.

"Just give me your hand." - Jack said softly - "We are in this together. We will wake up or we won't, but we are a team, buddy. After all, we share the same office, remember?" - He smiled, a vain attempt at joviality. He extended his right hand and I proffered my left,

coagulated stump, and we held on to each other and willed ourselves awake.

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Night Terror

1. The Doctor

He inserts the syringe into my jugular and draws blood, spurting into the cylindrical container. Securely seated on my chest, he then makes precise incisions around my eyelids and attempts to extract my eyeballs in one swift motion. I can see his round face, crooked teeth, and shiny black eyes, perched under bushy eyebrows. A tiny muscle flutters above his clenched jaw. His doctor's white robe flaps as he bestrides me and pins down my unthrashing arms.

There is only the stench of sweat and the muffled inhalations of tortured lungs. Mine. In my ears a drumbeat and a faraway shriek, like a seagull being butchered in mid-flight. My brain gives orders to phantom organs. I see them from the corners of my bloodshot eyes: my arms, my legs, like beached whales, bluish, gelatinous, and useless.

I scream.

I strike at him but he evades my thrust and recedes into the murky background. I won't give chase. The doors and windows are locked, alarm systems everywhere. He stands no chance. He turns to vapor and materializes next to me in bed, clad in his robe, eyes shut, a contented smile on his face.

This is my only chance.

I turn to my side, relieved that motility is restored. I grab his slender neck. I feel his pulse: it's fast and irregular. I squeeze. He grunts. And harder. He clasps my forearms and mewls. Something's not right. The doctor never whimpers. Every night, as he peels the skin off my face with delicacy and care, he makes no sound, except belabored breathing. When he extracts tooth after nail, castrates me time and again, injects detergents into my crumbling veins, he does so inaudibly and expertly.

I hesitate.

"Max!"

Her voice.

"Max! Wake up!"

I can't wake up as I am not asleep. The doctor's there, in our bed, a danger to us both. I must exterminate him finally.

"Max! You are having another nightmare! Please, you are hurting me!"

The doctor's head turns around full circle and at the back of his flattened skull there is the face of Sarah, my lover and my friend.

I recoil. I let go. My heart threatens to break through rib and skin, its thrumming in my ears, my brain, my eye sockets, my violated jugular.

I sleep.

2. Sarah

Her bags are packed, my scarlet fingerprints blemish the whiteness of her skin, she is crying. I reach for her but she retreats in horror, nostrils flared, eyes moist, a nervous tic above her clenched jaw.

"I am afraid of you." - She says, voice flat.

"I didn't mean to." - I feebly protest and she shrugs:

"Yesterday, I thought I'd die."

Her hand shoots to her neck involuntarily, caressing the sore bruises, where I attempted to strangle her at night.

"It's him, you know, the doctor."

She shudders.

"I saw him yesterday again; manicured, besuited, coiffed, as elegant as ever. He was injecting me with something that burned, it was not phenol, I would have died. It was something else."

"It's over." - Says Sarah, her eyes downcast, she sounds unconvinced.

"He's still alive." - I reason - "They haven't caught him, you know. They say he is in Argentina."

"Wherever he may be, there's nothing he can do to you."

She steps forward, palm extended towards my cheek,
and then thinks better of it, picks up her tattered suitcase
and leaves.

3. Again, the Doctor

A rigid plastic pipe, through the large vein in my leg,
towards my ovaries. I am a woman. I am to be
sterilized. The doctor crouches at the foot of my bed,
inspecting with mounting interest my private parts.
There is a greenish liquid in a giant plunger connected
to an IV stand. He nods with satisfaction. He brandishes
a glinting surgical knife and slices my abdomen. He
takes out a squarish organ mired in gory slime, my
womb, and inspects it thoroughly.

There's blood everywhere. I can see my intestines curled
in the cavity, wrapped tight in an opaque and pulsating
sheet. Two ribs are visible and underneath them, my
oversized heart. My breathing sears.

I chose tonight to be a woman. I want him to be at ease,
not on the alert. I want him to be immersed in
rearranging my organs, tearing them apart, sowing them
back reversed. I want him to forget himself in the
sandbox that is my body.

He leans over me, to study whether my left breast is
lactating.

It is not.

I reach for the hypodermic and detach it in one swift
motion.

I stick it in his jugular.

I press the plunger.

The doctor gurgles.

He whimpers and mewls.

He watches me intently as his senses dull and his body grows limp.

There is blood everywhere. The doctor drowns in it, my blood and his, a forbidden mixture.

4. The Police

"Was he a medical doctor?"

"Not that I am aware of."

The burly policeman scrawled in his threadbare pad.

The psychiatrist shifted in her overstuffed armchair:

"Why are you asking?"

She was a scrawny, bleached blonde and wore high heels and a plate-sized pendant to work. The cop sighed and slid a crime scene photograph across the burrowed surface of the desk.

"It's tough viewing. I hope you didn't have breakfast." -
He quipped.

She covered her mouth with a dainty, wrinkled hand as she absorbed the details.

"I can explain that." - She literally threw the photo back at her interlocutor.

He grimaced: "Go ahead, then."

"My patient is wearing the white doctor's robe because one of his alters was a Nazi camp doctor."

The policeman blinked:

"Beg your pardon?"

"My patient was a Polish Jew. He spent three years in various concentration camps, including Auschwitz."

"I heard of Auschwitz." - Said the policeman smugly.

"There, he and his young wife, Sarah, were subjected to medical experiments conducted by Nazi doctors in white robes."

"Medical experiments?"

"You don't want to know the details, believe me." - It was the psychiatrist's turn at one-upmanship.

But the officer was insistent.

"They sterilized his wife. At first, they injected some substance to her ovaries through a vein in her leg. Then they extracted her womb and what was left of her reproductive system. She was awake the entire time.

They did not bother with antiseptics. She died of infection in excruciating pain."

The policeman coughed nervously.

"When my patient was liberated, at the beginning of 1945, he developed a host of mental health problems. One of them was Dissociative Identity Disorder, formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder."

The cop scribbled something and mumbled to himself.

"He had three alters. In other words, his original personality fractured to at least three parts: the original He, another part that assumed the identity of his dead wife, and a part that became the doctor that tortured them. In the last few years, every night, he enacted scenes from their incarceration. The doctor would come to him, an hour or so after he fell asleep, and conduct various procedures on his body."

"Jesus!" - Blurted the policeman and went visibly pale.

"This is called 'night terror'. The subject is asleep. You cannot wake him up. But he believes himself to be wide awake and experiences extremes of terror. Usually, he cannot even respond because he is momentarily paralyzed. We call it 'sleep paralysis'"

"But then, if he cannot move, how did he kill himself? It was clearly suicide. We found the syringe. Only his fingerprints are on it. We were able to trace down the pharmacy where he bought it. He injected himself with some kind of acidic home detergent."

"Yes, it was suicide." - Agreed the psychiatrist, shut her eyes, and rubbed her temples - "As he grew older, he also developed Rapid Eye Movement Behavioral Disorder. This meant that after he was paralyzed by the night terror, he was actually able to enact it at a later stage of his sleep. He played the doctor, he played himself resisting the doctor, he played his wife being mutilated by the doctor. He wielded knives, syringes, wounded himself numerous times. You can find all the hospital admission forms in his file. I gave him anti-depressants. We talked. Nothing helped. He was beyond help. Some patients are beyond help." - Her voice quivered.

5. Help

"I killed him, Sarah, he's dead."

"I am glad."

"He will no longer bother us. We can be together again. I won't be having the dreams. I won't be attacking you anymore."

"That's good, Max."

"I peeled his face back, as he did to me. I injected him with the green liquid as he did to you. Revenge is sweet. I know it now."

"I love you, Max."

"And I never stopped loving you, Sarah. Not for a single moment."

A Dream Come True

"They call it: 'sleep deprivation'. I call it: hell. I can't remember the last time I have slept well, dreamlessly. You may say that it is to be expected when one is cooped up in a 4-by-4 cell, awaiting one's execution. But, I found myself engulfed by insomnia long before that. Indeed, as I kept telling my incompetent lawyer, one thing led to another. I hacked my wife to tiny pieces because of my phantasmagoric visions, not the other way around.

But, I am jumping the queue. Allow me to retrace.

Ever since I was apprehended and detained, fourteen months ago, I have embarked on this prolonged nocturnal time travel. The minute I started to doze off, I was catapulted into the past: I relived the first encounter with my wife to be, the courtship, the trip to Europe, our marriage, the house we bought, the birth of our son - all seemingly in real time, as protracted episodes.

Those were no ordinary hallucinations either. They were so vivid, so tangible, catering to my every sense, that, when I woke up, startled by the proximity of the damp walls, the rigidity of my bunk, and the coarseness of my uniform, I would lay awake for hours on end, disoriented and depleted by the experience.

Gradually, I came to dread the night. It was as though my past rushed forth, aiming to converge with my

hideous and hopeless present. The dreams that hounded me viciously were excruciatingly detailed, self-consistent, and their narrative - my autobiography - was congruent and continuous: I could smell Mary, feel the humid warmth of her breath, play with her hair, listen to her halting sentences. These specters progressed in an inevitable chronology: her adulterous affair, my consuming jealousy, our confrontations. I could predict the content of each and every ephemeral chapter in this hypnopompic saga simply because I had experienced them all beforehand as my very life.

I found the dreams' meticulous omniscience unnerving. I could not accept the perfection and impeccability thus imputed to my recollections. It all felt so real: when I wiped Mary's tears, my hand went wet; when I attended to our oft-neglected newborn, his smile was captivating, not a microsecond longer than it would have been in vivo; I bumped into furniture and bled as a result. Come morning, I was bruised.

Sometimes, when I woke up from such a trance, my heart expanded with insane anticipation: the cell, the moldy paraphernalia of the penitentiary, the solid bars, the vulgar images etched into the walls by countless predecessors - all these looked so ethereal compared to my nightly visitations! I would touch them disbelievingly until reality sank in and, heavyhearted, I would recline and stare at the murk that marked the ceiling, waiting for the sun to referee between my two existences.

Inexorably, my autolytic nightmares proceeded. When I confronted Mary with her infidelity, her dream-state wraith reacted exactly as its corporeal inspiration did in truth: contemning me, disparaging, mocking. I woke up perspiring and short of breath, cognizant of what would undoubtedly unfold next time I succumb to my overwhelming fatigue. I did not want to go through it again. I tortured my flesh into a full state of awakening, to no avail. Soon, I was aslumber and in the throes of yet another heinous segment.

This time, I found myself contemplating a kitchen knife embedded in a pool of darkening blood on the linoleum-covered floor. Mary was sprawled across the dining table in precarious acclivity, about to slip onto the abattoir. Her hair was matted, her eyes glazed, her skin a waxy tautness, and her finger pointed at me accusingly. I felt surprisingly composed, dimly aware that this is but a dream, that it had already happened.

Still, there was a sense of urgency and an inner dialog that prompted me to act. I picked up the gory implement and plunged it into Mary's neck. Dismemberment in the service of disposal occupied my mind in the next few hours as I separated limb from limb, sometimes sliding as I stepped onto the viscous muck. Finally, the work was done. Mary was no more.

I then stirred, glaring with lachrymose eyes at the glimmerings of incipient sunshine across the hall. The wardens in their first rounds bellowed our names ominously during the morning call. I examined myself

guiltily and apprehensively, but fourteen months of scrubbing had left no trace of Mary. My hands were clean.

I realized that the only way to put an end to this tormenting playback of my crime was to sleep at once and to intentionally traverse the time between my display of butchery and my current incarceration. Having barely digested the meager and rancid breakfast, I alternately cajoled and coerced myself into embracing the horror that awaited me. Throughout the next few days, I nodded off fitfully, recreating in my visions my blood-splattered effort to hack Mary's lifeless corpse to pieces; my ill-conceived attempt to flee; my capture; my trial and the verdict.

Finally, the night came that I feared most. I meditated, drawing deep breaths as I sought the arms of Morpheus. As I drifted away, I became vaguely aware of an odd convergence between my dream and my surroundings. In my fantasy, I was leg-fettered and manacled. Two beefy policemen unloaded me from the ramp of a truck and handed me over to the prison guards who led me, in turn, to my cell.

My dreams and reality having thus merged, I strove to wake up. In my nightmare, everything was in its place: the rusty bucket, the stone bunk, the fetid mattress, the infested blanket, the overhead naked bulb, way out of reach. I watched myself lying on the frigid slab. Startled and profoundly perturbed I asked myself: how could I occupy the same spot twice over? Wasn't I already

recumbent there, dreaming this, dreaming that I am posing these questions? But, if this were a dream, where is the real me? Why haven't I woken up, as I have done countless times before?

As the answers eluded me, I panicked. I shook the bars violently, banging my head against them. I was trapped in a delusion, but everyone around me seemed to think me real. The wardens rushed to restrain me, their faces contorted with disdain and rage. A block-mate yelled: "Hold on, buddy! It ain't so bad after a while!". A medic was summoned to look at my wounds.

The dream dragged on with none of the signs that hitherto heralded the transition to wakefulness. I tried every trick I knew to emerge from this interminable nether-state: I shut and opened my eyes in rapid succession; I pinched my forearm blue; I splashed water from the crumbling sink on my face; I iterated the names of all the states of the Union ... In vain. I was unable to extricate myself!

In my overpowering anxiety, I came with this idea: ensnared as I was in my nightmare, if I were to go to sleep and dream again, surely I would find my way back to reality! For what a dream is to reality, surely reality is to the dream? Reality, in other words, is merely a dreamer's reverie!

And so I did. Enmeshed in my nightmare, I went to sleep and dreamed of waking up to face this court. I want to believe with all my heart that you and I are real.

But, it isn't easy. You see, your Honor, I have been here before and I know the outcome. Had I dreamt it? I shall soon find out, I daresay. Here I am, Your Honour, unable to tell one from the other. Do with me as you please."

My lawyer rose and called to the stand the medical doctor that attended to my lacerations after my latest bout of raging incoherence. As he creaked his way across the wooden floor, the good practitioner glanced at me and nodded. I ignored him, unsure whether he is factual, or just a figment of my overwrought and febrile constitution.

At the bailiff's prompt, he raised his hand, swore on a hefty Bible and took his seat. Having responded to some perfunctory enquiries about his qualifications and position, he settled down to reply to my questions, put to him via my lawyer:

"I wouldn't go as far as saying that your client is medically, or even legally insane. He suffers from a severe case of pseudoinsonnia, though, that much is true."

Prompted as expected, the doctor elaborated:

"Your client sleeps well and regularly. All the physiological indicators are as they ought to be during a satisfactory and healthy somnolence. Moreover, your client has dreams, exactly like the rest of us. The only difference is that he dreams that he is awake."

Judge and jury jerked their heads in astounded incomprehension. The witness continued to enlighten the bench:

"Your honor, in his dreams, this patient fully believes that he is awake. People afflicted with this disorder complain of recurrent insomnia, even though our tests consistently fail to turn up a sleep disorder. In extremis, the very boundaries between wakefulness and napping get blurred. They find it difficult to tell if they are merely dreaming that they are awake, or are truly not asleep."

He rummaged among his papers until he found the transcripts of his interviews with me:

"In this patient's case, he developed pseudoinomnia after he discovered his wife's liaison with another man."
- The young doctor blushed - "He then began to dream that he is awake and that he is planning and executing the gruesome assassination of his spouse. Of course, throughout this time, he was sound asleep. The dreams he was having were so vivid and have processed such traumatic material that the patient remembered them in detail. Moreover, fully believing himself to be awake, he did not realize these were only dreams. He convinced himself that the events he had dreamt of had actually transpired."

The judge bent forward:

"Doctor," - he droned, evidently annoyed - "I don't

understand: if the patient believes that he had already murdered his wife, why is he a danger either to himself or to her, let alone to society at large? Surely, he is not going to murder her a second time?"

The court erupted in laughter and the judge, smug on the podium, was particularly slow to use his gable to quell the hooting.

The doctor removed his eyeglasses and rubbed the lenses carefully:

"The patient's sense of reality is impaired, Your Honor. For instance, he believes that he is in prison, like in his dreams, although he has been told numerous times that he has been committed to a mental health facility for evaluation. As far as he is concerned, his existence has become one big blur. Every time his dreams are contradicted, he may turn unsettled and agitated. He may even lose control and become violent. Next time he comes across his estranged wife, he may truly kill her, as a re-enactment and affirmation of his nightmares and he is bound to consider such a deed a harmless dream."

"So," - the judge interrupted him, impatiently - "it is your view that he should be committed?"

"I would definitely recommend it." - Concluded the doctor.

When all the formalities were over, the judge rose from his chair and we all stood up. As he reached the

entrance door to his chambers, he turned around, puzzled:

"By the way, where is his wife? I haven't seen her even once during these proceedings. Anyone has communicated with her? Technically, she is his guardian, you know."

There was a long silence as everyone avoided everyone else's gaze, shuffled feet, and ruffled papers.

That was my last chance:

"I murdered her, Your Honor. I have been telling you for months now!" - I shouted.

The judge eyed me pityingly, sighed, shrugged his shoulders and flung the door open, crossing into the penumbral recesses beyond.

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The Galatea of Cotard

We watch the dusk-drenched pyramids from our hotel room balcony and I say: “You got it all wrong, ma. He is not dead. We are.” Her stony face immobile, she wouldn’t look at me: “He has been dead for well over a decade, dear. You are confused.” I fidget and she hates it. I smirk, she hates it even more. I say: “He got me with a child. I had to rid myself of it.” She nods, exasperated.

I glance furtively at the inordinately large screen of my iPhone. Dali’s “Galatea of the Spheres”. Like her, I sense the wind howling among my molecules. I am grateful for the stillness of the air. The faintest breeze would have dispersed me irretrievably. I tighten my grip on the ornate banister and stare down at the teeming street. Where my womb used to be there is nothing but a weed-grown ruin. I feel its weather-beaten absence, scraped at diligently by doctors with scapulas and scalpels. I saw the blood emitted by my body, oozing from my genitalia, a wrathful, tar-black admonition.

“Are you hungry?” Her grammar and syntax always impeccable. I study my parent’s profile: the erstwhile firm chin now buckled, the flabby contours of her once muscular arms. Her stomach gone, like mine. Her eyes are tearful, the knuckles of her sculpted hands are white.

I chuckle bitterly: “Dead people don’t supp, mother. I expired during the operation, remember? When they extracted it ...” There is a moment of dead silence. “My succubus to his incubus.”

She takes a deep breath and exhales the words: “If you are truly deceased, then how are we conversing?”

That’s an easy one. “In our minds. In mine and yours. You took your own life, mama, when you found out. I stumbled across your lifeless body in the dark.”

She pinches me hard, her fingers clawing, clinging, burrowing deep. The flesh changes hues in protest. There is no pain, just a sudden blush and then it reverts to its waxy countenance. “This hurts,” – she declares – “I can see it on your contorted face!”

I am tired of being denied, of being negated so. “Father had me several times, mother, lasciviously. He got me pregnant. I went to a clinic. You visited me there. You were with him.”

She nods and shuts her hazel eyes:

“It was a psychiatric inpatient facility. They gave you medicines and electroconvulsive shocks. They diagnosed you with Cotard’s Syndrome. You were depressed, delusional, and suicidal. I had no choice. I am sorry.”

The intoxicating sounds of the street: donkeys braying; peddlers advertising their wares, often in rhyme; a muezzin’s call for prayer, nasal and atavistic; beggars whining, abscessed arms resting on amputated, fly-infested stumps. Death is everywhere. We are touring Hades and its infernal monuments: the pyramids, the sphinx, pets and people embalmed, fragile hair intact, desiccated eyeballs resting in grimy sockets, skeletal hands folded on disintegrating fabrics.

“Why are we here?” – I demand – “Why did you bring me here?”

My mother hesitates, bites her lips, cracks her fingers, all very atypical. Her nervousness is contagious and unsettling. She is always so composed. She is still a very beautiful woman. I have to remind myself, almost aloud, that she is a corpse, an apparition, an unreal projection of my mind or hers.

“I thought it would do you good,” – she finally utters enigmatically: “all this devotion to eternity, the afterlife, this unflinching and fearless obsession with death. It reminds me of your fixation, but it is not delusional and fallacious. Maybe it will give you the courage to confront ... I don’t know ...” – she tapers to a wistful whisper.

I reposition on the reed recliner. She notices my discomfort and raises her perfectly-plucked eyebrows:

“Uncomfortable, dear? One would have thought that you would be ...”

“... impervious to the inconveniences of the flesh.” – I complete the sentence for her. “I am, but my spirit isn’t. It needs time to adjust. My decay and putrefaction in the hospital were very sudden.”

“Ah!” – says mama, her gaze farsighted, contemplating the missing golden apexes of the pyramids.

There is a long silence, punctuated by eerie disembodied sounds emanating from the neighbouring

rooms. A couple is making love passionately and audibly. The woman screams, it sounds like agony. The man growls. Mother seems unperturbed.

“You find it difficult to accept that we have all died, that we are nothing but memories.”

“No,” – my mother’s tone is strict – “I find it painful to come to terms with your delusion that you are the disembowelled remnant of my daughter, that you are a rotting corpse, and that your father violated you which led to my demise. It’s all untrue, a figment of your overcharged mind and overburdened psyche. And despite abundant evidence to the contrary and notwithstanding many courses of treatment, you are still bent on your version of morbid fantasy. I resent it for your sake as much as mine.”

“Tomorrow we will visit the pyramids?” – I point at the distance. My mother perks up: “Yes, love, we will. Anything special you would like to do and see?”

I would like to visit graveyards. I would like to lie prostrate among the decomposing earth and smell the roots of flowers. Father is there. He bequeathed me hell and left. I would want to hurl it in his face. But, I exclaim none of these wishes. I merely shrug and shut my eyes, obscenely abandoning my face to the sun’s slanted caresses. I can feel my mother’s querying look upon me.

“One good thing,” – I try to comfort her – “is that the dead can never die again. We are both immortal now.”

My mother gulps and tries to control her wavering voice:

“Why do you prefer immortality to mortality, child?”

“I am afraid of dying, mummy.” – I mumble, now drowsy – “I have been through it once and didn’t cherish the experience.”

Mother laughs harshly: “What is death like? You’d be among the first to enlighten us. Others have never made it back, you know.”

I, lazily: “It’s like evaporation, an inexorable fading, an incremental shutting down of faculties and functions. It is this graduality that renders it so intolerable, I guess. The predictability of your own annulment.” – I sat up: “You remain conscious to the very last nano-second, you see. Even beyond, when you are no more. There’s no respite, you are forced to witness. Some unfortunates are never gone for good.” – I shudder.

“Ghosts,” – says my mother, but without scorn.

“Ghosts,” – I concur and rest my head on my mother’s plump shoulder. She strokes my hair and sings softly to herself. The sun is golden now, concealed behind the massive structures on the far horizon. In the emptiness that’s me, a steering, an alignment of the atoms, a coherence that is almost being.

“I love you, Mom,” – I say.

Fugue

"It is June", she says. The anxiety wells in the contours of her contorted face as she leans closer to me and scrutinizes my evasive gaze. I am in January and she is in my future, in the June of my life. Her eyes suspicious slits, wrinkled in the twilight zone between disbelief and fear and self-delusion. These months, a temporal abyss. She passes a hesitant hand through my hair and eyes her fingertips wistfully. She asks where I have been. "Here", I retort, "where else?" Where else, indeed. I am here in the month of January and it is searing hot and flowers and bees aflutter and the sun, an incongruous disc high in the sky. "It is June", she repeats, "and you have been gone for months." She elevates her lithe frame and sighs as she glides towards a half-opened door. Then she pauses, her hand on an immaculately polished metal handle. "The Police say they found you in the city, wandering, aimless, disoriented, half-naked." She studies me, hunting for a flicker of recognition, an amber of admission. In vain. The voices of exuberant children drift through the window and hang like pulsating smoke in mid air. She shrugs resignedly and shuts the door behind her. Minutes later she returns with a sweaty jug of sparkling water. "It's hot," she says, "it's summer, you know." I don't know, but I gulp down the libation. She reclines on the worn armrest of the couch and supports her oval face on a cupped and sensuous palm. "What have you been doing all this time? Don't you have the slightest recollection? Can't you try harder?" It's getting boring. I can't try harder. I can't try at all. I don't know what she's talking about, except that she has a point about June. Unless this is the hottest January on record, which deep inside I know it is not. I

study the floor tiles intently: aquamarine borders besieging a milky center. I count them. It gives me respite, it calms me down. "What have you been doing so far away from home?" She utters the convoluted, hyphenated name of a town I do not recognize. I shrug, it's becoming a reflex. A snippet: a man walking; the sounds of a raging sea as it confronts a barrier; the haunting lament of a solitary seagull. I shrug once more. She sighs and retreats, a whoosh of warm, perfumed air, a presence withdrawn in feigned resignation. But I know better than that: she never relents, that's the way she is. How can I be so certain? How could I have become acquainted with such an intimate detail if we have never met before as I so tenaciously maintain? It may well be June, she may well be right. There is a tiny fairy-tale house directly on the beach, its foundations bone-bare, gaping in limestone and steel-pierced concrete. The man is inspecting these exposed ribs of a beached abode, kneeling and fingering the walls in a curious cross between sacro-cranial massage and a caress. I cannot see his face, just the crew-cut of his hair and the outline of his sagging jaw. Then it's gone and she busies herself with a cigarette, the lighter clinks as it hits the reflective surface of a rotund glass stand. I watch her silhouette in the hallway mirror. She is a zaftig woman, her hair long and unbraided, eyebrows unplucked, two simmering coal lumps for eyes and a pale rendition of a mouth. She may well be a vampire. But sunlight is streaming through every crack and opening, a yellow, ethereal emanation, distinctly unsuited to zombies and other creatures of the night. Eerie apparitions jostle on the television screen, cut in half by potent words scrawled atop captions and banners: something about a family found murdered, stakes driven through their hearts while asleep. She says

from the doorframe: "This happened a few days ago in (again the unutterable name of that town)." And then: "They are still looking for the killer." I nod. The man is raising a glove-clad hand and peruses it in fascinated horror: the garment is bloodied and torn. He peels it off and tucks it into the crevice that underlies the house. The wind is howling. He scoops up sand and lets it drip through a funneled palm. Upstairs a woman and her children. He shudders at the thought. There's something familiar in the man, but I can't quite put my finger on it. I wish him to turn around so that I could see his face, but the man just keeps facing the wall, his back to the foaming sea, on his haunches, ramrod straight, frozen in time, in a grey January morning. January. Not June. A tsunami of relief: it couldn't have been me. I was here in January, almost throughout the entire month. With her? She stubs out the cigarette and re-enters the room. She catches glimpse of the gory news. Her voice is firm, determined: we have to talk. Talk, I say. "You vanished one January day ..." What day? On January 23. Go on. "You did not make contact since. A week ago, six months after you have gone missing, the Police found you ..." Yes, yes, I know, dishabille, rambling, incoherent. "When was this family killed?" I catch her off-guard. She veers towards the blaring set and then: "Their bodies were discovered a few days ago, skeletons really. They seemed to have been butchered months before, no one knows exactly when." An oppressive interlude. Why did it take so long to find them? "They have just relocated. No one knew them, the kids didn't even register at school yet." Kids? As in how many? Three, the youngest one four years of age. The man ... was he the father, her husband? Her breath is bated: "What man?" The murderer. "No one said anything about a man. They don't know who did it,

could have been a woman." And then: "Why do you think it was a man?" It takes a lot of strength to drive a stake through someone's chest, even a child's. "How would you know?" - she whispers. Was she married? I insist, an urgency in my voice that compels her to respond: "She was a widow. Cancer. He died four years ago to the day." What day? The day they were slaughtered. There's such finality in her voice, it's chilling. A tidal wave of apprehension. "You think I did it?" Her turn to shrug. We contemplate each other in the waning light. Her hair is glowing as she avoids my stare. Finally: "I know you did it." Know? How? "You told me." I am overtaken by panicked indignation: "I never did." She smiles wanly: "You were worn-out and fatigued. You remembered nothing except that you have finished off a family of vampires. You said you have made the world a better place." Vampires? "Vampires, like in the movies and the books." She crouches besides me and takes my hand tenderly. Then she pulls me off the couch and drags me through the penumbral corridors of her home. "Where are we going?" She doesn't bother to respond. We climb some stairs and walk the length of a carpeted landing. She turns a key and unlocks a massive oak door. She stands aside and lets me enter first. "This is your study." - she says. I want to deny it except the words stick in my throat as I survey the cavernous space: photos of me everywhere, and of us and professional certifications and award plaques and framed letters to and from. Too many to forge, they resonate and reawaken, they overpower me. I wander in, dazed and perplexed. A massive mahogany desk, littered with papers and opened books whose spines are shattered by frequent use. "Have a closer look", she suggests, quietly. I sink into an overstuffed imitation leather chair and ponder the stacks. "Vampire lore,

vampire science, vampire films, vampire literature," - she exclaims as she ruffles through the papers and the dusty tomes, enunciating the titles. "The family ..." - I mumble feebly. "A stake through the heart," she concurs, "the surest way to kill a vampire." "It's still doesn't prove it's been me ..." "Oh, give me a break!" she erupts and then clams shut and settles onto the window seal, pondering the overgrown garden. "What will you do now?" I ask and she quivers. There is a long silence, punctuated by our belabored breath and the rustling of dying leaves against the window. Her skin is abnormally pale in the dusky orange-flaming sun. I study her profile: the pronounced, hollow cheekbones, the deep-set sockets, the venous neck, down to her arthritic, gnarled hands that keep clutching and unclutching an imaginary purse. I can't remember the shape of her feet, or breasts, or womanhood. She is so alien, so out of my world. "You really don't remember a single thing?" I don't, except the maddening racket of the sea. The man springs to his feet. I feel he is about to turn. My knuckles white against the armrests, I shut my eyes and look inward at the unfolding scene. He swerves and, for a dizzying moment there I am afraid that he will lunge at me, just cross the distance in a leap and drive a sharpened stake down my spurting, protesting, convulsing heart. But, instead, he merely smiles, awfully familiar and friendly-like, and hands me the dripping implement. Then he waves his head in her general direction, something between farewell and an admonition. He is full of empathy and compassion as he fades and exits the darkened chamber.

Sexsomnia

"I am with child" – says Mariam, her eyes downcast. In the murk he could not tell if her cheeks are flushed, but the tremor in her voice and her posture are signs enough. They are betrothed, he having paid the mohar to her family two moons ago with witnesses aplenty. She was a virgin then: the elders of both families made sure and vouched for her. At 14 years of age she was no beauty, but her plainness and the goodness of her heart appealed to him. She was supple and lithe and a hard worker. He liked her natural scents and she often laughed, a bell-like tintinnabulation that he grew fond of as her presence insinuated itself into his dour existence. By now, she has permeated his abode, like silent waters.

Yoseph was somewhat older and more experienced than his wife-to-be. Short, stocky and hirsute, his only redeeming feature was his eyes: two coals aglow above a bulbous, venous nose in an otherwise coarse face. Originally from Judea, he found himself stranded in Nazareth, an outpost, half watchtower half settlement of crude and stony-faced peasants. He traced his ancestry back to King David and wouldn't marry one of theirs, so the locals mocked and resented him. Mariam's tribe was also from Judea and her barren cousin, Elisheva was long married to a Temple priest. Mariam was well-bred and observant of God's commandments. He could not imagine her sinning.

As was his habit, he laid down his tools, straightened up and stood, frozen in contemplation. Finally he asked: “Who is the father?” There were bewilderment and hurt in his voice.

Mariam shuffled her bare, delicate feet: “You are”, she whispered.

He tensed: “Don’t lie to me, Mariam.”

“I am not!” – She protested – “I am not!”

A shaft of light penetrated the hut and illuminated his table and the flapping corners of her gown.

“We are not to be married until after the harvest. I cannot know you until you are my wife. I did not know you, Mariam!”

She sobbed softly.

He sighed:

“What have you done, Mariam? If this were to be known ...”

“Please, please,” – she startled – “tell no one! No one need know!”

“It is not a thing you can hide for long, especially in Natseret” – he sniggered bitterly.

“I swear before God, as He is my witness: you had me, Yoseph, you knew me at night time, several times!”

“Mariam!” His voice was cold and cutting and he struggled to regain control and then, in softer tones:

“I will not make a public example of you, Mariam, worry not. I will give you leave tomorrow privately. We need only two witnesses.”

She fell silent, her breathing shallow and belaboured.

“Mariam?”

“You fell asleep and tossed and turned all night. I could hear you from my chamber. You then came to me, your eyes still shut. You ... you had me then, you knew me. It is the truth. Throughout the deed you never woke. I was afraid. I did not know whether to resist would have meant the end of you. You were as though possessed!”

Yoseph mulled over her words.

“I was asleep even when ... even when I seeded you?”

“Even then!” – Cried Mariam – “You must believe me! I didn’t want you dead or I would have done to rouse you! But you were so alive with passion, so accomplished and consummate ... and yet so numb, so ...” – Her voice faltered.

Yoseph crumbled onto a bench: “I walk at nighttime, Mariam. I know not whence and whither. I have no recollection. People have told me that they have seen me about the house and fields, but I remember naught.”

“I saw you at times,” – said Mariam – “so did Bilha the maiden servant whom you expelled when it was found she was with child.”

Yoseph drew air and exhaled.

“Have you told this to anyone?”

“I did,” – said Mariam, kneeling beside him and laying her calloused hand on his – “When I found out, I went to visit with Elisheva.”

Yoseph nodded his approval: “She is a wise woman. Had she some advice to give you?”

“She had,” – answered Mariam.

Yoseph straightened up and peered ahead into the penumbral frame of the reed door.

“She said I have a son,” – Mariam recounted softly – “your son, Yoseph! Our firstborn. Her husband, Zacharia, had a vision in the temple and was struck dumb by it. Elisheva is pregnant, too.”

Yoseph chuckled in disbelief: Elisheva was way past childbearing age.

“An angel appeared to Zacharia and told him that she will bear a son, a great man in Israel. I had a similar dream after I have returned from her. I saw an angel, too.”

“Woman, don’t blaspheme,” – exclaimed Yoseph peremptorily, but he was listening, albeit with incredulity, not awe.

“An angel came to me,” – persisted Mariam: “He said that I am the blessed among women and that I need fear not for I have found favour with God. He knew that I am with child. He promised me – us – a son and ordered that we should name him Yeshua. He shall be great, the fruit of your loins, and shall be called the Son of the Highest and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David and he shall reign ...”

“Enough!” – Shouted Yoseph – “You have gone mad, woman, you took leave of your senses! Not only do you blaspheme against God, the Holy Blessed be He, but you also incite rebellion! You will bring upon us the wrath of the mighty with your troubled speech!”

But Mariam pressed on, her diminutive frame ablaze with the crimson dusk, her hands held high:

“He shall reign, Yoseph, over the house of Yaakov forever and of his kingdom there shall be no end!”

Deflated, she crumbled onto the bench beside him, respiring heavily, supporting her bosom with one hand, the other palm again camped on his sinewed forearm.

Yoseph stirred: “How shall this be, seeing that you knew not a man?”

Mariam implored: “I did know you, Yoseph! Believe me, please, for I am not a harlot!”

He knew that. And he remembered Bilha’s words when she left his household, Hagar-like with her baby. “You are the child’s father!” – She protested – “You came upon me at night, aslumbered! I could not wake you up no matter what I did! There and then you took me and you knew me many times and now you cast me out to destitution!” And she cursed him and his progeny terribly.

Mariam beseeched:

“Zacharia told Elisheva that the Holy Ghost shall come upon me and the power of the most High shall overshadow me. Our son will, therefore, be the Son of God!” Yoseph recoiled involuntarily: this was high sacrilege and in his home, he who observed all the commandments from the lightest to the harshest!

“What did you answer?”

Mariam responded instantly: “I said to him who was surely the messenger of God: behold the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.”

Yoseph kept quiet for a few moments and then rose from their common seat:

“Mariam, tomorrow, in front of two competent witnesses, we will part. You will go your way and I will go mine. I cannot invoke the name of God, blessed be He and blessed be His Name, in vain. Not even for you and your child ...”

“Our child!” – Mariam screamed – “Our child, Yoseph! Curse be upon you if you abandon us and your firstborn son as you have Bilha’s!!!”

He swerved and left the shed, forsaking her to the shadows and the demons that always lurked in him and his abode.

That night, he slept and in his sleep he dreamt an angel. And the angel regarded him with great compassion and said to him:

“Yoseph! Fear not to take unto thee Mariam thy wife for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit and she shall bring forth a son and thou shalt call his name Yeshua for he shall save his people from their sins.”

And in his slumber, Yoseph turned his face from the terrible sight and cried, the tears rolling down his cheeks into the stubby growth that was his beard and onto his blanket. Even then he knew that he would marry Mariam and father Yeshua and that he will not live to see Him die a terrible death.

[Return](#)

The Suffering of Being Kafka

**Poetry
Of Healing and Abuse**

Our Love Alivid

by Sam Vaknin

*Our bloated love alivid
at the insolence of time
protests by falling in,
involuntarily committed.*

*You are the sadness
in my sepia nights.*

I am in yours.

*We correspond across
our dead togetherness.*

[Return](#)

Moi Aussi

by Sam Vaknin

*I need to know you
even as I never know my self
that phantom ache
of amputated innocence.*

*You,
the stirrings of a curtain, dust
settling on sepia cuckoo clocks
covers obscuring.
Perhaps one day you will become
a benign sentence
an agency
through which to be.*

[Return](#)

Cutting to Existence

by Sam Vaknin

*My little brother cuts himself into existence.
With razor tongue I try to shave his pain,
he wouldn't listen.
His ears are woolen screams, the wrath
of heartbeats breaking to the surface.
His own Red Art.
When he cups his bleeding hands
the sea of our childhood
wells in my eyes
wells in his veins
like common salt.*

Return

A Hundred Children

by Sam Vaknin

*Tell me about your sunshine
and the sounds of coffee
and of barefeet pounding the earthen floor
the creaking trees
and the skinned memory of hugs
you gave
and you received.
Sit down, yes, here,
the intermittent sobbing
of the shades
slit by your golden face.
Now listen to the hundred children
that are your womb.
I am among them.*

[Return](#)

The Old Gods Wander

by Sam Vaknin

*Your promised lands
with reticence.
Grey, forced benevolence.
They shrug their crumpled robes,
extend in veinous hand
black cornucopia.
You're fighting back, it's evident,
bony protrusions, a thumping chest,
the clamming up of sweaty pearls.
They aim at your Olympian head.
There, in the meadows of your mind,
grazing on dewy hurt,
they defecate a premonition
of impending doom.*

[Return](#)

In the Concentration Camp Called Home

by Sam Vaknin

*In the concentration camp called Home,
we report in striped pyjamas
to the barefeet commandant,
Our Mother orchestrating
our daily holocaust.
Burrowing her finger-
-nails through my palms,
a scream frozen between us,
a stalactite of terror
in the green caves of her eyes
there, sentenced to forced labour:
to mine her veins of hatred
to shovel her contempt
to pile scorn upon scorn
beating(s) a path.
At noon, Our Mother
leads us to the chambers
naked, ripples of flesh
she turns on the gas
and watches our hunger
as her food devours us.*

[Return](#)

The Miracle of the Kisses

by Sam Vaknin

*That night, the cock denied him thrice.
His mother and the whore downloaded him,
nails etched into his palms,
his thorny forehead glistening,
his body speared.
He wanted to revive unto their moisture.
But the nauseating scents of vinegar
and Roman legionnaires,
the dampness of the cave,
and then that final stone...
His brain wide open,
supper digested
that was to have been his last.
He missed so his disciples,
the miracle of their kisses.
He was determined not to decompose.*

[Return](#)

Fearful Love

by Sam Vaknin

*Cherubim turn swords,
cast flaming fig leaves
on a cursed ground.
With bruised heels
we labour
among the bitten,
festering fruits of our ignorance,
making thorns and thistles
of our crowns.
In the sweat of our faces,
a pheromonic resonance.
In our dusty hearts,
skinclad, in cleavage,
we hope to live forever,
flesh closed upon itself,
conceiving sorrow.
Our trees are pleasant to the sight
of gold and onyxstone
and every beast and fowl has its name
except for our nakedness.
In a garden of talking serpents,
cool days and lying Gods,
I betray you to the voice
and hide.*

[Return](#)

My Putrid Lover

by Sam Vaknin

*My lover dreams
of acrid smells
and putrid tangs
I lick
(dishevelled hair adorns)
her feet
I scale
the shrink-warped body.
I vomit semen
that her lips ingest.
And youth defies her.*

[Return](#)

When You Wake the Morning

by Sam Vaknin

*When you wake the morning
red headed children shimmer in your eyes.*

*The veinous map
of sun drenched eyelids
flutters
throbbing topography.*

*Your muscles ripple.
Scared animals burrow
under your dewey skin.
Frozen light sculptures
where wrinkles dwell.*

*Embroidered shades,
in thick-maned tapestry.
Your lips depart in scarlet,
flesh to withering flesh,
and breath in curved tranquility
escapes the flaring nostrils.
Your warmth invades my sweat,
your lips leave skin regards
on my humidity.
Eyelashes clash.*

[Return](#)

Narcissism

by Sam Vaknin

*The Toxic
waste of bottled anger
venomised.
Life belly up.
The reeds.
The wind is hissing
death
downstream,
a river holds
its vapour breath
and leaves black lips
of tar and fish
a bloated shore.*

[Return](#)

Prague at Dusk

by Sam Vaknin

*Prague lays over its inhabitants in shades of grey.
Oppressively close to the surface, some of us duck, others
simply walk carefully, our shoulders stooped, trying to
avoid the monochrome rainbow at the end of the hesitant
rain. Prague rains itself on us, impaled on one hundreds
towers, on a thousand immolated golden domes. We
pretend not to see it bleeding to the river. We just cross
each other in ornate street corners, from behind
exquisite palaces. We don't shake heads politely anymore.
We are not sure whether they will stay connected if we do.*

*It is in such times that I remember an especially sad song,
Arabic sounds interlaced with Jewish wailing. Wall after
wall, turret after turret, I re-visit my homeland. It is
there, in that city, which is not Arab, nor Jewish, not
entirely modern, nor decidedly antique that I met her.*

And the pain was strong.

[Return](#)

In Moist Propinquity

by Sam Vaknin

*Hemmed in our bed,
in moist propinquity,
'tis night and starry
and the neighbourhood inebriated,
in the vomitory of our street.*

*A woman,
my stone-faced lover,
a woman and her smells.
The yellow haze of melancholy lampposts.
Your hair consumes you.*

[Return](#)

Prowling

by Sam Vaknin

*The little things we do together
to give up life.
The percolating coffee,
your aromatic breath,
the dream that glues
your eyelids to my cheek.
We both relent relentlessly.
Your hair flows to its end,
a natural cascade,
a velvet avalanche
buries my hands.
In motion paralysed,
we prowl each other's
hunting grounds.
Day breaks, our backs
turned to the light
in dark refusal.*

[Return](#)

Getting Old

by Sam Vaknin

*The sageing flesh,
a wrinkled vicedom.
The veined reverberation
of a life consumed.
On corneas imprinted
with a thousand dreams,
now stage penumbral plays
directed by a sight receding
and a brain enraged.
To fall, as curtains call,
to bow the last,
rendered a sepia image
in a camera obscured,
a line of credits,
fully exhausted,
fully endured.*

[Return](#)

Sally Ann

by Sam Vaknin

I wrote, Sally Ann, I wrote:

*Shot from the cannon of abuse
as unwise missiles do.*

Course set.

*Explosive clouds that mark
your video destination.*

*Experts interpret,
pricking with laser markers,
inflated dialects
of doom.*

*Hitting the target, you
splinter, a spectacle
of fire and of smoke.*

*The molten ashes,
the cold metallic remnants,
the core...*

*A peace accord
between you and your self.*

[Return](#)

Selfdream

by Sam Vaknin

*At times, I dream myself besieged.
I rebel with the cunning of the weak.
I walk the shortcuts.
Tormentors clad
in blood-soaked black,
salute as I manipulate them
into realising their abyss.
Some weep their sockets hollow,
or waive their thorns.
Much pain negotiated.
A trading of the wounds.
My chains carve metal
and I am branded.*

[Return](#)

Snowflake Haiku

by Sam Vaknin

*Where I begin
your end
snowflake haikus
melt into
crystalline awareness.*

*I guard
your quivered sleep.
Your skin beats moisture.
The beckoning jugular
that is your mind.*

My pointing teeth.

*A universe
of frozen sharp relief,
the icy darts your voice
in my inebriated veins
in yours.*

[Return](#)

Twinkle Star

by Sam Vaknin

*Twinkle star
of barren scape
and ashen craters.
Seething Ammonia winds.
The fine dust
of life forgone
on surface tensioned.
Beneath its crust
trapped oceans surge
in icy recollection.
It hurls its core
again the dimming sun's
depleted inattention.*

[Return](#)

Synthetic Joy

by Sam Vaknin

*Synthetic joy of wedding halls,
caked bride and groom,
a spewing orchestra,
metallic rings.*

*Exchanging aqueous looks,
thickset in exudate,
the relatives.*

*Mother exuding age,
a father pillaged by defeat,
a clutch of wombless matrons.*

*The light is ashen,
the food partitioned.*

Soon, scene of soiled tables.

Soon, the relieved goodbyes.

Soon, the breathless breeding and the crumpled sheets.

The neon lights extinguished by the dawn.

[Return](#)

Tableaux (van Gogh)

by Sam Vaknin

*Listening to a scarlet sink, detached
an ear, still glistening wax,
in bloody conch.
The gaping flesh.
Wild scattered eyes
fiercing the mirror.
Light ricochets from trembling blade
(it's gaslight evening and the breeze...)
Behind his stooping shoulders,
a painted room ablaze
the dripping composition of his blood.
The winding crowd
inflates the curtains inwards,
sails of a flying Dutchman.*

[Return](#)

Hebrew Love

by Sam Vaknin

Ahavat ha'akher ena ela

Loving another is merely

ahavat ha'ani ba'akher.

Loving Myself in another.

Ba'akher ani:

In the Other I:

Khesronot

Shortcomings

Ke'evim

Pains

Nikudei turpa

Vulnerabilities

Kabala lelo hatnaya

the Unconditional Intercourse of

Ahavim.

Love.

Lehitama bahem

Subsumed

Ulehatmia.

Engulfing.

Ulam shel mar'ot,

A Hall of Mirrors,

Gvulut ben shtei aratsot nokhriot,

Two Bounded States,

Ir prazot

an Open City

vehaohev basha'ar,

my Lover at its gates,

Gesher khovek

a Bridge hugging

tehomot,

an abyss,

Migdal mamri, kulo safa belula,

a tower, heaven reached, wholly confounded language,

Mabul.

a Deluge.

Verak anakhnu,

And only Us,

Shnayim beteiva venoakh

two of a sort,

li velakh.

an Ark, a Covenant.

[Return](#)

Her Birthday

by Sam Vaknin

I. Apology ...

My Wife:

**Sometimes I watch you from behind:
your shoulders, avian, aflutter.**

**Your ruby hands;
the feet that carry you to me
and then away.**

I know I wrong You.

**Your eyes black pools; your skin eruptions of what is
and could have been.**

**I vow to make you happy, but
my Hunchbacked Self
just tolls the bells
and guards you from afar.**

II. ... And Thanks

**In the wasteland that is Me
You flower.**

**Your eyes black petals strewn
across the tumbling masonry.**

Your stem resists my winds.

**Your roots, deep in my soil,
toil in murk to feed both you and me,
to nurture Us.**

**And every day a spring,
and every morn a sunshine:
you're in my garden,
you blossom day and night.**

**Your sculpted daint feels
in my hands like oneness.**

THE AUTHOR

Shmuel (Sam) Vaknin

Curriculum Vitae

Click on [blue text](#) to access relevant Web sites – thank you.

Born in 1961 in Qiryat-Yam, Israel.

Served in the Israeli Defence Force (1979-1982) in training and education units.

Education

1970-1978: Completed nine semesters in the Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa.

1982-3: Ph.D. in Philosophy (dissertation: "[Time Asymmetry Revisited](#)") – [Pacific Western University](#), **California**, USA.

1982-5: Graduate of numerous courses in Finance Theory and International Trading in the UK and USA.

Certified [E-Commerce Concepts Analyst](#) by [Brainbench](#).

Certified in [Psychological Counselling Techniques](#) by [Brainbench](#).

Certified [Financial Analyst](#) by [Brainbench](#).

Full proficiency in Hebrew and in English.

Business Experience

1980 to 1983

Founder and co-owner of a chain of computerised information kiosks in Tel-Aviv, Israel.

1982 to 1985

Senior positions with the Nessim D. Gaon Group of Companies in Geneva, Paris and New-York (NOGA and APROFIM SA):

- Chief Analyst of Edible Commodities in the Group's Headquarters in Switzerland
- Manager of the Research and Analysis Division
- Manager of the Data Processing Division
- Project Manager of the Nigerian Computerised Census
- Vice President in charge of RND and Advanced Technologies
- Vice President in charge of Sovereign Debt Financing

1985 to 1986

Represented Canadian Venture Capital Funds in Israel.

1986 to 1987

General Manager of IPE Ltd. in London. The firm financed international multi-lateral countertrade and leasing transactions.

1988 to 1990

Co-founder and Director of "Mikbats-Tesuah", a portfolio management firm based in Tel-Aviv.

Activities included large-scale portfolio management, underwriting, forex trading and general financial advisory services.

1990 to Present

Freelance consultant to many of Israel's Blue-Chip firms, mainly on issues related to the capital markets in Israel, Canada, the UK and the USA.

Consultant to foreign RND ventures and to Governments on macro-economic matters.

Freelance journalist in various media in the United States.

1990 to 1995

President of the Israel chapter of the Professors World Peace Academy (PWPA) and (briefly) Israel representative of the "Washington Times".

1993 to 1994

Co-owner and Director of many business enterprises:

- The Omega and Energy Air-Conditioning Concern
 - AVP Financial Consultants
 - Handiman Legal Services
- Total annual turnover of the group: 10 million USD.

Co-owner, Director and Finance Manager of COSTI Ltd. – Israel's largest computerised information vendor and developer. Raised funds through a series of private placements locally in the USA, Canada and London.

1993 to 1996

Publisher and Editor of a Capital Markets Newsletter distributed by subscription only to dozens of subscribers countrywide.

In a legal precedent in 1995 – studied in business schools and law faculties across Israel – was tried for his role in an attempted takeover of Israel's Agriculture Bank.

Was interned in the State School of Prison Wardens.

Managed the Central School Library, wrote, published and lectured on various occasions.

Managed the Internet and International News Department of an Israeli mass media group, "Ha-Tikshoret and Namer".

Assistant in the Law Faculty in Tel-Aviv University (to Prof. S.G. Shoham).

1996 to 1999

Financial consultant to leading businesses in Macedonia, Russia and the Czech Republic.

Economic commentator in "[Nova Makedonija](#)", "[Dnevnik](#)", "Makedonija Denes", "Izvestia", "Argumenti i Fakti", "The Middle East Times", "[The New Presence](#)", "[Central Europe Review](#)", and other periodicals, and in the economic programs on various channels of Macedonian Television.

Chief Lecturer in courses in Macedonia organised by the Agency of Privatization, by the Stock Exchange, and by the Ministry of Trade.

1999 to 2002

Economic Advisor to the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and to the Ministry of Finance.

2001 to 2003

Senior Business Correspondent for [United Press International \(UPI\)](#).

2007 -

Associate Editor, [Global Politician](#)

Founding Analyst, [The Analyst Network](#)

Contributing Writer, [The American Chronicle Media Group](#)

Expert, [Self-growth](#) and [Buzimoms](#)

2007-2008

Columnist and analyst in "[Nova Makedonija](#)", "Fokus", and "[Kapital](#)" (Macedonian papers and newweeklies).

2008-

Member of the [Steering Committee for the Advancement of Healthcare in the Republic of Macedonia](#)

Advisor to the Minister of Health of Macedonia

Seminars and lectures on economic issues in various forums in Macedonia.

2011-

[Editor in Chief](#) of [Global Politician](#).

Web and Journalistic Activities

Author of extensive Web sites in:

– Psychology (["Malignant Self Love"](#)) - An [Open Directory Cool Site](#) for 8 years.

– Philosophy (["Philosophical Musings"](#)),

– Economics and Geopolitics (["World in Conflict and Transition"](#)).

Owner of the [Narcissistic Abuse Study Lists](#) and the [Abusive Relationships Newsletter](#) (more than 6,000 members).

Owner of the [Economies in Conflict and Transition Study List](#) , the [Toxic Relationships Study List](#), and the [Links and Factoid Study List](#).

Editor of mental health disorders and Central and Eastern Europe categories in various Web directories ([Open Directory](#), [Search Europe](#), [Mentalhelp.net](#)).

Editor of the [Personality Disorders](#), Narcissistic Personality Disorder, the [Verbal and Emotional Abuse](#), and the [Spousal \(Domestic\) Abuse and Violence](#) topics on Suite 101 and [Bellaonline](#).

Columnist and commentator in "The New Presence", [United Press International \(UPI\)](#), InternetContent, eBookWeb, [PopMatters](#), [Global Politician](#), The [Analyst Network](#), Conservative Voice, The [American Chronicle Media Group](#), [eBookNet.org](#), and "[Central Europe Review](#)".

Publications and Awards

"Managing Investment Portfolios in States of Uncertainty", Limon Publishers, Tel-Aviv, 1988

"The Gambling Industry", Limon Publishers, Tel-Aviv, 1990

["Requesting My Loved One – Short Stories"](#), Yedioth Aharonot, Tel-Aviv, 1997

["The Suffering of Being Kafka"](#) (electronic book of Hebrew and English Short Fiction), Prague, 1998-2004

"The Macedonian Economy at a Crossroads – On the Way to a Healthier Economy" (dialogues with [Nikola Gruevski](#)), Skopje, 1998

["The Exporters' Pocketbook"](#), Ministry of Trade, Republic of Macedonia, Skopje, 1999

["Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited"](#), Narcissus Publications, Prague, 1999-2007 (Read excerpts - click [here](#))

[The Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Abuse in Relationships Series](#)
(E-books regarding relationships with abusive narcissists and psychopaths), Prague, 1999-2010

[Personality Disorders Revisited](#) (e-book about personality disorders), Prague, 2007

["After the Rain – How the West Lost the East"](#), Narcissus Publications in association with [Central Europe Review/CEENMI](#), Prague and Skopje, 2000

Winner of numerous awards, among them [Israel's Council of Culture and Art Prize for Maiden Prose](#) (1997), The Rotary Club Award for Social Studies (1976), and the Bilateral Relations Studies Award of the American Embassy in Israel (1978).

[Hundreds of professional articles](#) in all fields of finance and economics, and numerous articles dealing with geopolitical and political economic issues published in both print and Web periodicals in many countries.

[Many appearances in the electronic media](#) on subjects in philosophy and the sciences, and concerning economic matters.

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<http://ceeandbalkan.tripod.com/>

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<http://philosophos.tripod.com/>

Poetry:

<http://samvak.tripod.com/contents.html>

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